



Education and Training: Family Physicians versus Nurse Practitioners

Most Nurse Practitioners (NP)—also known as Advanced Practice Nurses (APN) and Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioners (ARNP)—receive their education typically through a one-and-a-half to three-year degree program that confers a Master of Science in Nursing (MSN), depending on the prior education of the student. While many nurses have a MSN degree, there are alternate pathways available in a state to achieve NP licensure without advanced collegiate education. There is no single national accreditation agency for NP programs. Rather, NP education programs are housed within graduate programs accredited by one of several accreditation entities, including the American Association of Colleges of Nursing's (AACN) Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE), the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN), and the National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health Council on Accreditation. As of August 2015, there were 264 Practice Doctorate in Nursing programs enrolling students at schools of nursing, and an additional 60 DNP programs in planning stages. Typically, master's level nursing programs require students for entry at least to have passed the National Council Licensure Exam for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) and satisfactorily completed the Graduate Record Examination (GRE).

Vanderbilt University's MSN program, for example, offers a Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) specialization program. For registered nurses with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), the MSN program is three semesters of 40 total credit hours, inclusive of didactic and clinical education. According to the program's handbook, MSN FNP candidates receive a total of 800 combined hours of didactic and lab education. Clinical education is estimated to amount to approximately 1,400 hours. For students with a bachelor's degree and no nursing experience, Vanderbilt offers a program of six semesters, or three full-time years, of education and training that leads to an MSN degree.

Family Physicians receive their education typically through a four-year degree program at one of the 175 accredited allopathic or osteopathic medical schools in the United States. Students must pass the Medical College Admissions Test for entrance into medical school. Medical students spend nearly 9,000 hours in lectures, clinical study, lab and direct patient care. The overall training process begins with medical school and continues through residency. During their time in medical school, students take two "step" exams, called the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) or the National Board of Osteopathic Medical Examiners COMLEX-USA exams, and must take core clerkships, or periods of clinical instruction. Passing both exams and the clerkships grants students the Medical Doctor (MD) or Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine (DO) degree, which entitles them to start full clinical training in a residency program.

Most family medicine residency programs, which are accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME), require three years of training. As with other specialties, family medicine residency programs have specific requirements with certain numbers of hours and patient care experiences that must be completed for board certification. They are designed to provide integrated experiences in ambulatory, community and inpatient environments during three years of concentrated study and hands-on training.

The first year of residency called the internship year, is when the final "step" of the USMLE or COMLEX (Step 3 exam) is taken. During their three years of training, residents must meet the program requirements for both residency education in family medicine

and certification by the American Board of Family Medicine (ABFM) or the American Osteopathic Board of Family Practice (AOBFP). Specific requirements for family medicine training vary by residency program. After three “program years” of training are completed and all requirements are met, residents are eligible to take the certification exam by the ABFM or AOBFP. Toward the end of residency, physicians also apply for licensure from their state medical boards, which determines where they can practice as a board-certified family physician. Although each state is different in their requirements for initial medical licensure, it is a necessity that physicians pass Step 3 of the USMLE.

The below tables offer a side-by-side comparison of the education and training involved in becoming a family physician versus the requirements to become a nurse practitioner.

Degrees Required and Time to Completion

	Undergraduate Degree	Entrance Exam	Post-Graduate Schooling	Residency and Duration	TOTAL TIME FOR COMPLETION
Family Physician (MD or DO)	Standard 4-year BA/BS	Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)	4 years, doctoral program (MD or DO)	REQUIRED, 3 years minimum	11 years
Nurse Practitioner (NP, ARNP, etc.)	Standard 4-year BA/BS*	Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and National Council Licensure Exam for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN)	1.5 – 3 years, master’s program (MSN)	NONE	5.5 – 7 years

Clinical Hours for Completion

	Combined Hours (Clinical Years)	Residency Hours
Family Physician	6,000	9,000 – 10,000
Nurse Practitioner	500 – 1,500	0
DIFFERENCE	5,500 – 5,000	9,000 – 10,000

*While a standard 4-year degree, preferably a BSN, is recommended, alternate pathways exist for an RN without a bachelor’s degree to enter some master’s programs.