

What is respiratory care?

Respiratory care provides relief to millions of Americans, from newborns to the elderly, who have difficulty breathing or cannot breathe on their own due to impaired or nonfunctioning lungs.

Typical patients of respiratory care therapists suffer from asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), bronchitis, lung cancer, stroke, drowning accidents, heart attacks, birth defects, emphysema, cystic fibrosis, or sleep apnea. Trauma victims and surgery patients are also treated by respiratory therapists. In addition to treatment, respiratory care also includes education and rehabilitation services, plus diagnostic testing.

Here are some of the things respiratory therapists do:

- Use life support mechanical ventilation for patients who need it.
- Administer medications in aerosol form.
- Monitor equipment and patients' responses to therapy.
- Obtain blood specimens and analyze them to determine levels of oxygen, carbon dioxide, and other gases.
- Maintain artificial airways (tracheostomy or intubation).
- Measure the capacity of patients' lungs to determine if there is impairment.
- Obtain and analyze sputum specimens and chest X-rays.
- Interpret data from tests.
- Assess vital signs and other indicators of respiratory dysfunction.
- Perform stress tests and other studies of the cardiopulmonary system.
- Study disorders of people with disruptive sleep patterns.
- Conduct rehabilitation activities.
- Lead asthma education and smoking cessation programs.



A list of respiratory care education programs, as well as links to other valuable resources are available at the Respiratory Care Board's Web site, www.rcb.ca.gov.

Respiratory Care Board of California
444 North 3rd Street, Suite 270
Sacramento, CA 95811

P: (866) 375-0386 or (916) 323-9983
F: (916) 323-9999
E: rcbinfo@dca.ca.gov

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DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS



Respiratory Care

A Medical Career

Giving a Breath of Life





In California, only licensed Respiratory Care Practitioners (RCPs) can provide respiratory care. RCPs are one of three types of licensed healthcare professionals who work at patients' bedsides most often. The other two are physicians and registered nurses.

Work Settings

Most respiratory care therapists work in hospitals (emergency, intensive care, neonatal/pediatric units, cardiac care, etc.), but there is a growing number being employed in other settings, including:

- Medical flight transports
- Hyperbaric oxygen units
- Private homes
- Skilled nursing facilities
- Various laboratories
 - Rehabilitation - Cardiopulmonary
 - Blood gas - Sleep testing

Work Shifts

RCPs generally work 35 to 40 hours a week. Because care is provided around the clock in most settings, therapists may work evenings, nights, or weekends. The most common shifts are three 12-hour shifts, four 9-hour shifts, and five 8-hour shifts per week.

Education

The minimum educational requirements for licensure as an RCP include an associate degree with completion of an approved respiratory care program.

There are approximately 33 schools throughout California that offer respiratory care programs. Areas of study include human anatomy and physiology, chemistry, physics, microbiology, and mathematics. Programs also include clinical practice at local hospitals. Programs take two years of full-time dedication to complete.

The 2007 California Respiratory Care Practitioner Workforce Study found that there is likely to be a serious shortage of RCPs in California in the coming decades. Here's why:

- RCPs have a mean age of 45, meaning that many of them will leave the workforce through retirement.
- Many of those about to enter the profession are older individuals returning to school, which will result in shorter career spans.
- California has a growing population of people 65 and older, who use a large portion of available respiratory care services.
- Advances in treating victims of heart attacks or accidents and premature infants (many of whom are dependent on a ventilator during part of their treatment) will increase the demand for respiratory care services.

Salaries and Benefits

Pay ranges differ throughout California, although all regions consider education and experience levels when setting salaries. The following salaries were determined through a poll conducted by the Board in January 2006 and the 2007 Workforce Study:

RCP-ENTRY LEVEL

Up to \$36 per hour, \$6,192 per month, and \$74,304 per year
(Note: 26 percent of employers offer signing bonuses up to \$5,000.)

RCP-LEVEL II

Up to \$40 per hour, \$6,880 per month, \$82,560 per year

RCP-SUPERVISOR/COORDINATOR

Up to \$45 per hour, \$7,740 per month, \$92,880 per year

RCP-MANAGER/DIRECTOR

Up to \$58 per hour, \$9,976 per month, \$119,712 per year

Many employers also offer medical, dental, vision, and/or life insurance; paid vacation; sick leave; and/or retirement plans.

Comments from RCPs

Newly licensed RCPs were asked what they like about their career and what drew them to the respiratory care field. Here are some of their comments:

“I enjoy respiratory therapy, because it makes my life meaningful knowing that I am helping and in some cases saving lives.”

“I really like working with the doctors; they rely on our expertise and assessment skills.”

“I particularly enjoy the one-on-one contact with patients. I spend time explaining treatments and monitoring their responses to therapy.”

“I was excited about becoming a respiratory care practitioner because I wanted to help people.”

“I entered my respiratory care program because I wanted to specialize in an area of health care.”

“A busy day may include assembling, operating, and monitoring various medical devices which allows me to administer oxygen or medications to assist with breathing – I also love the flexible hours.”

