



Preparing for the
ONCC Certification
Examinations

a booklet of
study tips and
test-taking
hints

This booklet was developed for candidates who are planning to take an ONCC certification examination. It is intended to help the reader prepare for the examination.

The information presented in this booklet supplements the material contained in the *Oncology Nursing Certification Bulletin*, including the test blueprints and reference lists. This booklet does not include specific information about the tests, such as sample questions, but offers general information about ONCC certification examinations.

Preparing for an ONCC certification examination differs for each individual. Although ONCC recommends you review this booklet and the *Oncology Nursing Certification Bulletin* in preparation to take the examination, use of these materials does not guarantee successful completion of the ONCC tests.

ONCC Board of Directors

About ONCC

The Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation (ONCC) is a member Board whose mission is to promote and provide oncology nursing certification for the enhancement of patient care and professional practice. ONCC is accredited by the American Board of Nursing Specialties as well as the National Commission for Certifying Agencies.

Certification granted by ONCC is according to a voluntary procedure intended solely to test for special knowledge. ONCC does not purport to license, to confer a right or privilege upon, nor otherwise to define qualifications of any person for nursing practice.

It is the responsibility of the candidate to contact the appropriate state board of nursing or institution regarding the significance of certification in any jurisdiction or institution.

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Introduction

There are many benefits to becoming certified in oncology nursing, whether at the basic (OCN®), advanced (AOCN®, AOCNP, or AOCNS, or pediatric (CPON®) level. To the individual nurse, attainment of the credential is a personal achievement that can boost self-esteem and increase self-confidence. Certification may also help a nurse progress along the career ladder, or open doors to new job opportunities and increased earning potential.

To employers, oncology nursing certification signifies a nurse has met or exceeded rigorous criteria for knowledge and experience, and possesses a measured competency in a demanding practice area. Patients and families whose care is delivered by certified nurses are reassured the nurses have obtained the knowledge and skill to competently provide specialized care.

Before you begin to study for the OCN[®], AOCNP, AOCNS, or CPON[®] examination, review the *Oncology Nursing Certification Bulletin* to confirm you are eligible to take the test. The *Certification Bulletin* contains complete information on eligibility requirements for all three certification examinations. You should also be aware of application deadlines, test dates, locations, and related expenses.

Once you have decided to pursue certification, consider the following tips to help you prepare to take the examination.

1. Assess your learning needs

Review the appropriate test blueprint in the *Oncology Nursing Certification Bulletin* to identify the content areas that will be on the test. Pay close attention to how each area is weighted to determine the percentage of questions that pertain to each area. When reviewing the test blueprint, identify which areas are your strengths and weaknesses. Consider ranking the areas on a scale of 1 to 4: with 1 being a topic you are unfamiliar with and 4 a topic you are confident about (Miller, 1993).

2. Build a personal study plan

Establish learning objectives based on your assessment in step one. It is important for each individual to develop a personal study plan that reflects his or her specific goals (Palos, 1992). You may want to concentrate more on the content areas that you are least familiar with, or study each area in relation to its weight on the examination. Consider the following:

Create a study schedule. Most candidates allow several months to prepare for a certification examination. Develop a study schedule to meet your learning objectives and allocate time to review each of the examination content areas. Include time to obtain review materials. Do not leave all of your preparation for one long study session the night before the test.

Choose your study methods. There are a variety of methods to consider, such as individual study, pairing with study partners, group study, participating in a review course, using computer assisted instruction, attending seminars or in-service programs, taking a Practice Test, etc. You may benefit by using a variety of study methods to learn different types of material.

Some candidates may be hesitant to let others know they will be taking the examination and choose to study alone. However, there are advantages to utilizing a study partner or group. Reference materials (which can be expensive if purchased by one person) can be shared, colleagues can provide support, and nurses with expertise in different areas can tutor one another.

3. The Test Blueprint

The single most valuable piece of information that you will have in preparing for the examination is the OCN[®], AOCNP, AOCNS, or CPON[®] *Test Blueprint* included in the *Oncology Nursing Certification Bulletin*. Each test blueprint describes the content areas, topics and subtopics, as well as how the content will be weighted. If the blueprint states that Quality of Life will be given a weight of 27%, then you can determine how many questions will represent that content by taking the total number of questions x .27 (27%). It is important to identify the areas in which you are knowledgeable and those in which you are limited.

4. Collect your materials

Review the appropriate reference list in the *Oncology Nursing Certification Bulletin* for potential study materials. Select books to meet your knowledge limitations. If you select a comprehensive textbook, study the sections on content with which you are least familiar. If you will be working with a study partner or participating in group study, determine who will provide various materials. Establish a schedule for sharing study materials.

5. Investigate review courses

If you are planning to take a review course, check possible offerings and register for a course that meets your needs. Contact your local Oncology Nursing Society (ONS) or Association of Pediatric Oncology Nurses (APON) chapter, or check at your worksite for information about review courses.

You should be aware ONCC does not conduct certification review courses or recommend specific courses. Be cautious about courses that claim or imply direct knowledge of specific ONCC examination content. ONCC does not release test questions, except sample questions published in the *Oncology Nursing Certification Bulletin* and those included in ONCC Practice Tests. Additionally, the individuals who develop the actual tests are

not permitted to conduct review courses while working on test development and for three years after. When evaluating a potential review course, remember the quality of the course may be related to the ability and expertise of the individuals who conduct it. All test candidates should remember ONCC cannot be responsible for errors in the content of any review course.

6. Carry out your plan

Plot your study plan on a calendar and stick to it. Pace yourself according to your goals. Keep track of your progress so you know where you stand. If you fall behind your timeline, revise your plan to meet your study goals.

Allow a reasonable amount of time for each study session. Plan study sessions at a time that is best for you, and for a length that meets your learning needs. For example, several sessions of a few hours each may be more beneficial than one long session. Try to find a quiet place to study, without distractions, and include a few breaks in your schedule.

Use study methods that have worked well for you in the past. Depending on the material to be learned, you may find reciting, visualizing, or associating the information with its practical application helpful (Miller, 1993). Some candidates prefer to take notes, highlight a textbook, prepare quiz cards with questions on one side and answers on the other, read into a tape recorder and listen to the tapes, or have someone quiz them from sample tests.

Some test questions will simply ask you to recall a fact. However, many questions will require you to apply information to a particular situation. This type of question involves an extra step in the thought process. You must first recall the fact, then apply it to the situation posed in the question. For this reason, your study efforts should include some attempt to review problem-solving situations in the professional literature, and to determine how you would handle them (ANCC, 1994).

Keep in mind that ONCC examinations use only generic names of drugs. Be sure you are familiar with the generic names of all oncology treatments and the drugs used to manage the side effects of cancer treatments.

If you will be using practice tests, be sure to correct your answers. Look for patterns in the questions you answer incorrectly (Rollant, 1994). For example, if

most of your incorrect answers relate to a particular content area, revise your study plan to focus on that area. If most of the missed questions are at the beginning or end of a practice test, that may indicate times of anxiety or fatigue when you need to concentrate more intensely. If you find you know the answers to the questions you miss on practice tests, you may have a tendency to misread the questions or the responses.

Remember that questions on practice tests that are not prepared by ONCC may not represent the style of questions or content topics that actually appear on the ONCC examinations.

7. Reduce your anxiety

Prepare a checklist of items you need to take the test. Refer to your Authorization to Test (computer-based test candidates) or your Admission Letter (paper-and-pencil test candidates) for items you should take with you to the test center. If the test will be held in an unfamiliar location, reduce your anxiety by taking a trip to the site before the test day. If you will be driving, familiarize yourself with the route, traffic patterns, and parking facilities.

Plan to arrive at the test center on time. Refer to your Authorization to Test (computer-based test candidates) or Admission Letter (paper-and-pencil test candidates) for your scheduled reporting time. Allow extra time to be sure you arrive on schedule. Candidates who arrive late may not be permitted to test.

Prepare for a comfortable test experience. Remember that no food or drink will be allowed in the testing room, and it may be several hours before you can eat again. If possible, avoid substances that could make you feel anxious, drowsy, or create the need for frequent trips to the restroom. Candidates will be permitted to leave the testing room only with the supervisor's permission. Candidates will not be permitted to make up the time lost. Dress comfortably and prepare for temperature fluctuations in the testing room by wearing layered clothing. Plan to arrive at the test site early in case of unexpected delays. After you arrive at the test site, avoid last minute "cramming" and try to relax before you start the examination.

8. Take the test with confidence

Your score is determined by the number of questions you answer correctly. As there is no penalty for incorrect answers, it is to your advantage to answer every question (ONCC, 2000).

The examination consists of entirely multiple-choice questions. Consider the following suggestions for taking multiple-choice tests (Rollant, 1994).

Look for words such as *most, first, initially, immediately, usual*. Look for absolutes such as *always, never, every, none, all, all of the time*. These words can help you choose the best answer.

Read the questions systematically. Read the question first and think of the answer. Do not assume information not given or go beyond what the question asks. Then read all of the responses.

Try turning each multiple-choice option into a true and false statement and apply “T” or “F” to each option. Use the process of elimination to select the optimal choice. If the question seems difficult, at least mark the question for further review, and move to the next question. When taking a paper-and-pencil test, be sure to place a question mark on your answer sheet next to this question so that you can quickly return to it if time permits. Avoid thinking about prior questions while you move on to the next question.

When weighing options, look for those that embody good nursing judgment and that enhance communication, respect, and acceptance of patients’ feelings. Choose options that are correct in all respects and that relate to common needs or to the population in general (Coleman, Stanley, Chenevey, Sullivan, and Cardin, 1988).

Do not change an answer. Unless you have misread the question the first time or recall new information, it is unwise to change the answer you initially chose.

Pace yourself during the test. Don’t spend too much time on any one question. When you have completed all of the questions, return to questions you marked for review. If taking a paper-and-pencil test, check your answer sheet

for stray marks or questions that have more than one answer and erase the extra marks completely. On paper-and-pencil tests, questions that have more than one response darkened will be scored as incorrect.

Stay calm and focused. Relaxation strategies can be implemented during the examination to help you stay calm and focused. It may take longer to relax if you wait until the tension is too high. Short exercises performed intermittently are most effective. Identify what part of your body has the most muscle tightness. Take a deep breath and then select an exercise that will help eliminate the tension (Pierce, Gibbons, Cullen, 1995).

9. Re-energize following the test

Briefly review your performance during the test to get a sense of accomplishment. However, avoid dwelling on questions and going over the test with colleagues. Focus on positive outcomes and reward yourself for completing the ONCC examination process (Pierce, Gibbons, Cullen, 1995).

10. Waiting for your score

Candidates who take a computer-based certification test will receive a preliminary score report at the testing center immediately after completing the test; a formal score report will be mailed to the candidate within two weeks. Score reports for paper-and-pencil test candidates are printed and mailed to candidates four to six weeks after the examination date. Initially, it takes a week to ten days for all the answer sheets to be reviewed by the testing company. Next, the examinations are scored and numerous quality control checks are performed. Once these tasks have been completed, the scores are printed and mailed to the candidates.

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