CAREER KIT

CNA Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

At a glance

To become a certified nursing assistant (CNA), you complete a state-approved nurse aide training program, pass your state's competency exam (a written or oral test plus a skills demonstration), and get listed on your state's nurse aide registry. Federal rules require at least 75 hours of training, and many states require more. Most people finish in 4–12 weeks, and some nursing homes pay for training.

Timeline	4–12 weeks for most programs
Typical cost	$0–$2,500 (some employers pay for training)
Education	State-approved nurse aide training program; high school diploma not required by federal rules but often required by programs
License	State competency exam and listing on the state nurse aide registry
Median pay	$42,260 per year
Job outlook	+3% (2025–35), about as fast as average; about 203,300 openings a year (with orderlies)

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Look up your state's nurse aide requirements

Time: 1 week

Each state runs its own nurse aide training and registry program, usually through the health department or board of nursing. Federal law sets the floor at 75 training hours, including at least 16 hours of supervised practical training, but many states require more. California, for example, requires 160 hours: 60 hours of classroom theory and 100 hours of supervised clinical training.

2. Choose a state-approved CNA program

Time: 1–2 weeks

Programs run at community colleges, technical schools, high schools, the American Red Cross in some areas, hospitals, and nursing homes. Only a state-approved program qualifies you for the exam, so confirm approval on your state's list. Ask about schedule (day, evening, weekend), clinical site, total cost, and exam pass rates.

3. Look for free or employer-paid training

Time: 1–2 weeks

Federal rules say a nurse aide who is employed by, or has a job offer from, a nursing facility when starting a program cannot be charged for it. If you pay yourself and are hired by a nursing facility within 12 months of finishing, the state must reimburse your costs on a pro rata basis. Ask local nursing homes about paid training before you enroll elsewhere.

4. Complete classroom and clinical training

Time: 3–12 weeks · Cost: $0–$2,500

You will learn basic nursing skills, infection control, safety and emergency procedures, personal care such as bathing and feeding, taking vital signs, residents' rights, and communication. Clinical hours take place in a nursing home or similar setting under a nurse's supervision. Show up on time and treat the clinical site as a possible employer.

5. Pass your state's competency exam

Time: 1 day (schedule 1–4 weeks out) · Cost: $100–$200 in most states

The exam has two parts: a written or oral knowledge test and a hands-on skills evaluation where a nurse evaluator watches you perform randomly selected skills. Many states use the NNAAP exam, delivered by vendors such as Credentia or Pearson VUE, while others use their own test. Federal rules give you at least three attempts.

6. Get listed on the nurse aide registry

Time: Up to 30 days

After you pass, the state adds you to its nurse aide registry, which employers must check before you can work as a nurse aide in a nursing home. Your official title, such as CNA, depends on your state. Some states also require a criminal background check or fingerprints.

7. Apply for nursing assistant jobs

Time: 1–4 weeks

Nursing homes, hospitals, home health agencies, assisted living facilities, and rehab centers all hire CNAs. Many offer sign-on bonuses, shift differentials, or tuition help toward LPN or RN programs. Keep working at least part time: if you go 24 months in a row without paid nursing-related work, federal rules require you to retrain and retest.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
State-approved CNA training program	$0	$2,500	Typical range, varies by school; free when a nursing facility employs you or has offered you a job
State competency exam (written/oral + skills)	$100	$200	Varies by state; sometimes included in tuition or paid by employers
Textbook and supplies	$50	$200	Typical range; often included in tuition
Scrubs, shoes, watch with second hand	$75	$200	Typical range
Background check or fingerprints	$20	$100	Varies by state
TB test, immunizations, physical	$0	$150	Typical range; free at some clinics or through the program
Total	**$245**	**$3,350**	

Requirements

Training	Complete a state-approved nurse aide training program. Federal minimum is 75 clock hours with at least 16 hours of supervised practical training; many states require more (California requires 160).
Competency exam	Pass both parts of your state's exam: a written or oral test and a skills demonstration. Many states use the NNAAP exam.
Registry	You must be on your state's nurse aide registry to work as a nurse aide in a nursing home. Employers verify your listing before you start.
Background check	Varies by state. Many states and employers require a criminal background check, and some use fingerprinting.
Health requirements	Programs and employers usually require a TB test, immunization records, and sometimes a physical or drug screen.
Age and education	Varies by state and program. Many programs require you to be at least 16–18 and some ask for a high school diploma or GED; check the specific program.
Keeping your certification	Federal rules require retraining if you go 24 consecutive months without paid nursing or nursing-related work. States set their own renewal steps, such as proof of work hours or continuing education.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Find the right program

Days 1–30

Goal: Enroll in a state-approved program, ideally free or employer-paid.

- ☐ Find your state's nurse aide registry and list of approved training programs
- ☐ Note your state's required training hours and exam vendor
- ☐ Call three local nursing homes and ask about paid or free CNA training
- ☐ Compare programs on cost, schedule, clinical site, and exam pass rates
- ☐ Gather ID, immunization records, and schedule a TB test
- ☐ Enroll and block out time for classes and clinicals

Phase 2: Train and practice skills

Days 31–60

Goal: Finish training and master every skill on the exam list.

- ☐ Download your state's candidate handbook and print the skills checklist
- ☐ Practice each skill step by step, out loud, until you can do it without notes
- ☐ Pay special attention to handwashing, vital signs, and resident safety steps
- ☐ Take at least three practice written tests
- ☐ Ask your clinical instructor for feedback on your weakest skills
- ☐ Apply for the exam as soon as your program allows

Phase 3: Pass the exam and get hired

Days 61–90

Goal: Pass both parts of the exam, get on the registry, and start working.

- [ ] Take the written (or oral) and skills exams
- [ ] Check that your name appears on the state nurse aide registry
- [ ] Write a one-page resume listing your clinical hours and skills
- [ ] Apply to 5–10 jobs per week at nursing homes, hospitals, and home health agencies
- [ ] Ask about shift differentials and tuition help for LPN or RN school
- [ ] Practice the interview questions in this kit
- [ ] Save proof of your work hours for future registry renewals

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ Government-issued photo ID
- ☐ Social Security card (often required for the registry and employment)
- ☐ Training program completion certificate
- ☐ Exam results and registry listing printout
- ☐ TB test results and immunization records
- ☐ Background check or fingerprint clearance (if your state requires it)
- ☐ CPR/BLS card (if your employer requires it)
- ☐ Resume and list of 3 references
- ☐ Pay stubs or employer letters showing work hours (for renewals)

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

NNAAP (National Nurse Aide Assessment Program)

What it is: Used by many states. A 70-question multiple-choice written exam (an oral version is available) plus a skills evaluation where you perform five randomly selected nurse aide skills for a nurse evaluator. Delivered by vendors such as Credentia; details vary by state.

How to prepare: 2–4 weeks: review your state's candidate handbook, practice every listed skill step by step, and take practice tests.

State-specific nurse aide competency exam

What it is: Some states use their own written and skills tests instead of the NNAAP. Federal rules require both a knowledge test (written or oral) and a skills demonstration.

How to prepare: Use the official candidate handbook from your state's testing vendor; it lists every skill you could be tested on.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be a CNA?

Tip: Share a real reason, such as caring for a family member, and connect it to patient dignity.

2. How do you protect a resident's privacy and dignity during care?

Tip: Mention closing curtains, knocking, explaining care, and covering the resident.

3. What would you do if a resident refused a bath?

Tip: Respect the right to refuse, try again later or offer options, and report to the nurse.

4. What would you do if you saw a coworker mistreating a resident?

Tip: Say you would make sure the resident is safe and report it immediately, as required.

5. How do you prevent falls?

Tip: Talk about call lights within reach, locked bed wheels, non-skid footwear, and clear paths.

6. Walk me through taking a set of vital signs.

Tip: Go step by step, including identifying the resident and reporting abnormal readings.

7. How do you handle a resident with dementia who is agitated?

Tip: Stay calm, use a soft voice, redirect, and follow the care plan.

8. How do you manage your time with many residents?

Tip: Explain prioritizing safety needs first and communicating with the nurse.

9. Are you comfortable with night or weekend shifts?

Tip: Be honest about availability; flexibility often gets you hired faster.

10. Tell me about a time you dealt with a difficult family member.

Tip: Listen, stay professional, and refer clinical questions to the nurse.

11. What infection control steps do you follow?

Tip: Hand hygiene, gloves, proper linen handling, and isolation precautions.

12. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Tip: Mention growing as a CNA or moving toward LPN or RN school.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Completed a 120-hour state-approved nurse aide training program, including clinical hours in long-term care
- Listed on the state nurse aide registry after passing the written and skills competency exams
- Assisted 10–12 residents per shift with bathing, dressing, feeding, and mobility
- Measured and recorded vital signs and intake and output accurately
- Used safe transfer techniques and gait belts to prevent falls
- Reported changes in residents' condition promptly to the charge nurse
- Followed infection control and isolation procedures
- Current BLS/CPR certification

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Paying for a program that is not on your state's approved list
2. Paying full tuition without first asking nursing homes about free training
3. Memorizing the skills but skipping the small steps, like handwashing or checking the call light, that fail candidates
4. Waiting too long after training to take the exam
5. Letting your registry status lapse by not working for 24 months
6. Assuming your certification transfers automatically to a new state
7. Not keeping proof of work hours for renewal

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS: Nursing Assistants and Orderlies**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/nursing-assistants.htm

- **NCSBN: National Nurse Aide Assessment Program (NNAAP)**

https://www.ncsbn.org

- **Credentia (NNAAP testing vendor in many states)**

https://credentia.com

- **Pearson VUE: Nurse aide testing**

https://www.pearsonvue.com

- **42 CFR 483.152: Nurse aide training rules**

https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/42/483.152

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $33,940	**$42,260 per year**	More than $51,980

Outlook: BLS projects employment of nursing assistants to grow 3% from 2025 to 2035, about as fast as average. There were about 1,505,900 nursing assistant jobs in 2025, and about 203,300 openings are projected each year for nursing assistants and orderlies combined, mostly to replace workers who leave.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook (Nursing Assistants and Orderlies), May 2025 wage data for nursing assistants; projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/nursing-assistants.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.