

The Nova Scotia College of Nursing (NSCN) is the regulatory body for licensed practical nurses (LPNs), registered nurses (RNs), registered psychiatric nurses (RPNs) and nurse practitioners (NPs) in Nova Scotia. Our mandate is to protect the public by promoting the provision of safe, competent, ethical and compassionate nursing services by our registrants. The term nurse in this document refers to LPNs, RNs, RPNs and NPs unless otherwise stated.

Contents

What is a Registered Psychiatric Nurse (RPN)?.....2

How are RPNs different from other nursing designations?2

What kind of education do RPNs receive?2

Do RPNs receive entry level education related to physical health?2

What is the RPN Scope of Practice?2

What does RPN practice look like?3

Can RPNs prescribe medications?3

Can RPNs work in non-mental health settings?3

Can an RPN work as an RN or LPN?3

How can I become licensed as an RPN?3

How do I get licensed as an RPN in Nova Scotia?3

First published as Registered Psychiatric Nurse (RPN) FAQ, December 2025.

Copyright © Nova Scotia College of Nursing, Bedford Nova Scotia. Commercial or for-profit redistribution of this document in part or in whole is prohibited except with the written consent of NSCN. This document may be reproduced in part or in whole for personal or educational use without permission, provided that:

- Due diligence is exercised in ensuring the accuracy of the materials reproduced;
- NSCN is identified as the source; and
- The reproduction is not represented as an official version of the materials reproduced, nor as having been made in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of, NSCN

Our practice support tools are developed using current reference material. The source of this material is available upon request.

WHAT IS A REGISTERED PSYCHIATRIC NURSE (RPN)?

RPNs are autonomous nurses with comprehensive knowledge of mental, physical, developmental and emotional health care. RPNs provide health care to individuals, families, groups, and communities with complex psychosocial, mental health, addictions, and physical needs. RPN practice uses a holistic approach to health and illness. RPNs work collaboratively with clients and other health care team members to coordinate client-centered care.

RPNs are authorized to independently and autonomously assess, develop, implement, and evaluate the plan of care for clients with mental health conditions, with or without underlying physical conditions. As with all nurses, RPNs are expected to collaborate with other health care providers to meet the needs of the client and when the needs of the client exceed their scope of practice.

Although new to Nova Scotia RPNs have been in practice in other parts of Canada for many years. RPNs are currently regulated in Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, the Yukon and Northwest Territories and Nunavut.

HOW ARE RPNs DIFFERENT FROM OTHER NURSING DESIGNATIONS?

LPNs, RNs, RPNs and NPs are different designations of nurses with the profession of nursing. There are shared competencies between each designation, however RPN education has a greater focus on comprehensive and advanced mental health competencies. RPNs have their own unique code of ethics, standards of practice and entry level competencies.

WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION DO RPNs RECEIVE?

RPNs graduate from a baccalaureate program or a three-year equivalent diploma in psychiatric nursing. A Master of Psychiatric Nursing has been offered at Brandon University in Manitoba since 2011.

The breadth, depth and focus on mental health and addictions and advanced therapeutic relationships and communication distinguish psychiatric nursing education from other nursing programs.

Graduates must pass the Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Canada (RPNC) Examination to be eligible for registration and licensure as an RPN. There are eight approved RPN education programs (primarily in Western Canada). There is no approved psychiatric nursing education program in Nova Scotia.

DO RPNs RECEIVE ENTRY LEVEL EDUCATION RELATED TO PHYSICAL HEALTH?

While the focus of RPN education is mental health and addictions, RPNs also have foundational knowledge of biological and physical sciences. Recognizing that many psychiatric clients have medical co-morbidities, RPNs have general medical and surgical nursing competencies and may further develop their general medical surgical competencies with additional post entry level education via their employer.

WHAT IS THE RPN SCOPE OF PRACTICE?

The professional scope of practice of RPNs is determined by the Nursing Act and regulations and is defined as the roles, functions and accountabilities RPNs are educated in and authorized to perform in Nova Scotia.

The scope of practice for a registered psychiatric nurse includes the provision of nursing services to plan, implement and evaluate mental, psychosocial and physical health care by applying psychiatric nursing knowledge, skills and judgment that meet at least of the following criteria:

- they are taught in a registered psychiatric nursing education program approved by a nursing regulator in Canada;
- they are set out in entry-level competencies or standards of practice approved by the Board;
- they are set out in practice guidelines approved by the CEO.

For more on scope of practice, individual scope of practice and scope of employment, [click here](#).

Nursing practice is complex based on competencies, which is the knowledge, skills and judgment required to practice safely and ethically. Nursing practice cannot be captured by a skills list or task list and NSCN does not have a skill or task list for RPNs.

WHAT DOES RPN PRACTICE LOOK LIKE?

RPNs **entry level practice** includes advanced competencies related to mental health care. NPs, RNs and in some contexts, LPNs can attain these advanced competencies with additional post-entry level education.

The following are examples of RPN practice, but is not an exhaustive list:

- Assisting clients to achieve, maintain and restore their optimal physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual health.
- Assessing, formulating a nursing diagnosis or diagnostic impression, planning, providing, and evaluating treatment and interventions.
- Educating students, clients and others
- Advocating with or on behalf of clients.
- Counselling clients
- Coordinating, monitoring, delivering, and evaluating nursing services.
- Managing, administering, and developing systems and policy related to nursing and the provision of health care and psychosocial services.
- Engaging in research related to nursing, health and the practice of registered psychiatric nursing.
- Accepting and making referrals to other health professionals.

CAN RPNs PRESCRIBE MEDICATIONS?

While prescribing is in the broader professional scope of practice of RPNs, the regulatory mechanism to enable RPN prescribing in Nova Scotia has yet to be developed.

CAN RPNs WORK IN NON- MENTAL HEALTH SETTINGS?

RPNs have foundational education in anatomy and physiology, microbiology, physical assessment, pathophysiology and medical-surgical nursing assessment and intervention, this enables them to care for psychiatric clients with medical-surgical co-morbidities.

There is no restriction on the practice settings in which an RPN can practice. However, as with any other nursing designation, the RPN must assess their individual competence to ensure they have the competencies to provide the type of care in question, including understanding what to do if an adverse outcome occurs. This includes reflecting on whether the RPN has the necessary experience and expertise to make evidence informed decisions and manage the specific type of care effectively.

If the RPN identifies lack of competencies due to insufficient experience or expertise, it is their responsibility to inform their employer and collaboratively seek ways to acquire that skill to meet the needs of clients within their care setting.

All nurses should utilize the [Three-Factor Framework](#) when making decisions about who is the most appropriate nurse to provide care in a specific context.

CAN AN RPN WORK AS AN RN OR LPN?

All nurses must hold registration and licensure in the designation in which they are employed. Designations are not interchangeable.

HOW CAN I BECOME LICENSED AS AN RPN?

To be licensed as an RPN, individuals must complete a psychiatric nursing program and pass the Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Canada (RPNC) Examination. These requirements must be fulfilled, regardless of existing nursing licensure.

HOW DO I GET LICENSED AS AN RPN IN NOVA SCOTIA?

As there are no RPN education programs in Nova Scotia at this time, you must establish registration and licensure in another Canadian jurisdiction. Once licensed, you can apply to NSCN for licensure under our expedited license process for nurses registered and licensed in good standing elsewhere in Canada.