

# Respiratory Therapist

## **Professional Activities**

Respiratory therapists care for patients who have trouble breathing; for example, from a chronic respiratory disease, such as asthma or emphysema. They also provide emergency care to patients suffering from heart attacks, stroke, drowning, or shock. Most respiratory therapists work in hospitals. Others may work in nursing care facilities or travel to patients' homes.

Respiratory therapists typically do the following: Interview and examine patients with breathing or cardiopulmonary disorders, consult with physicians to develop patient treatment plans, perform diagnostic tests such as measuring lung capacity, treat patients, using a variety of methods, including chest physiotherapy and aerosol medications, monitor and record the progress of treatment, supervise respiratory therapy technicians during tests and evaluate the findings of the tests, and teach patients how to use treatments.

Respiratory therapists use various tests to evaluate patients. For example, therapists test lung capacity by having patients breathe into an instrument that measures the volume and flow of oxygen when they inhale and exhale. Respiratory therapists may also take blood samples and use a blood gas analyzer to test the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels present.

Respiratory therapists perform chest physiotherapy on patients to remove mucus from their lungs and make it easier for them to breathe. Removing mucus is necessary for patients suffering from lung diseases, such as cystic fibrosis, and involves the therapist vibrating the patient's rib cage, often by tapping the patient's chest and encouraging him or her to cough.

Respiratory therapists may connect patients who cannot breathe on their own to ventilators to deliver oxygen to the lungs. Therapists insert a tube in the patient's windpipe (trachea), and connect the tube to ventilator equipment. They set and monitor the equipment to ensure that the patient is receiving the correct amount of oxygen at the correct rate.

Respiratory therapists who work in home care teach patients and their families to use ventilators and other life-support systems in their homes. During these visits, they may inspect and clean equipment, check the home for environmental hazards, and ensure that patients know how to use their medications. Therapists also make emergency home visits when necessary.

In some hospitals, respiratory therapists are involved in related areas, such as counseling people on how to stop smoking and diagnosing breathing problems for people with sleep apnea.

Most respiratory therapists work full time. Because they may work in medical facilities such as hospitals that are always open, some may work evening, night, or weekend hours.

## **Educational Requirements**

Respiratory therapists need at least an associate's degree, but employers look favorably on applicants who have more education. Many colleges and universities, vocational-technical institutes, and the Armed Forces offer training. Most programs award an associate's or bachelor's degree. All programs have clinical components that allow therapists to earn course credit and gain supervised, practical experience treating

patients. Respiratory therapists are licensed in all states except Alaska, although requirements vary by state. Licensure requirements in most states include completing a state or professional certification exam.

Respiratory therapy programs include courses in human anatomy and physiology, chemistry, physics, microbiology, pharmacology, and mathematics. Other courses deal with therapeutic and diagnostic procedures and tests, equipment, patient assessment, and cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

High school students interested in applying to respiratory therapy programs should take courses in health, biology, mathematics, chemistry, and physics.

Many employers prefer to hire respiratory therapists who have certification. Certification is not always required, but it is widely respected throughout the occupation. Certification usually requires graduating from an accredited program and passing a certification exam and is often required in order to get a state license. The [National Board for Respiratory Care](#) (NBRC) is the main certifying body for respiratory therapists. The Board offers two levels of certification: the Certified Respiratory Therapist (CRT) and the Registered Respiratory Therapist (RRT).

The first-level certification available from NBRC for respiratory therapists is the CRT certification. Applicants must have earned an associate's degree from an accredited respiratory therapy program, or completed the equivalent coursework in a bachelor's degree program, and pass an exam.

The second-level certification available from NBRC is the RRT certification. Applicants must have a CRT certification, meet other education or experience requirements, and pass an exam.

### **Academic Programs**

[College of DuPage](#)

[Illinois Central College](#)

[Kankakee Community College](#)

[Kaskaskia College](#)

[Lincoln Land Community College](#)

[Malcom X College](#)

[Moraine Valley Community College](#)

[Parkland College](#)

[Rock Valley College](#)

[Rush University](#)

[St. Augustine](#)

[Southwestern Illinois College](#)

[Trinity College of Nursing and Health Sciences](#)

### **Employment/Salary Outlook**

Growth in the middle-aged and elderly population will lead to an increased incidence of respiratory conditions such as emphysema, chronic bronchitis, and pneumonia, respiratory disorders that permanently damage the lungs or restrict lung function. These factors will lead to an increased demand for respiratory therapy services and treatments, mostly in hospitals and nursing homes. In addition, advances in preventing and detecting disease, improved medications, and more sophisticated treatments will increase the demand for respiratory therapists. Other conditions affecting the general population, such as smoking, air pollution, and respiratory emergencies, will continue to create demand for respiratory therapists.

## State and National Wages

Location	Pay Period	2021		
		Low	Median	High
United States	Hourly	\$22.78	\$29.73	\$45.93
	Annual	\$47,380	\$61,830	\$95,540
Illinois	Hourly	\$22.95	\$29.40	\$37.61
	Annual	\$47,740	\$61,160	\$78,230

## State and National Trends

United States	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings <sup>1</sup>
	2021	2031		
Respiratory Therapists	135,800	154,200	14%	9,400
Illinois	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings <sup>1</sup>
	2020	2030		
Respiratory Therapists	4,510	5,360	+17%	310

<sup>1</sup>Job Openings refers to the average annual job openings due to growth and net replacement.

Employment trends data for **Respiratory Therapists** is included in these trends data.

## Professional Organizations

American Association for Respiratory Care ([aarc.org](http://aarc.org))

The [Commission on Accreditation for Respiratory Care](#) maintains a list of accredited educational programs for respiratory care practitioners.

The [National Board for Respiratory Care](#) provides a list of state licensing agencies, as well as information on gaining credentials in respiratory care.

## References

*Occupational Outlook Handbook*, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics  
(<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/respiratory-therapists.htm>)

O\*NET OnLine (<http://www.onetonline.org/link/details/29-1126.00>)

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