

American Association of Critical-Care Nurses (AACN) Certification Practice Test (Sample)

Study Guide



Everything you need from our exam experts!

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Introduction

Preparing for a certification exam can feel overwhelming, but with the right tools, it becomes an opportunity to build confidence, sharpen your skills, and move one step closer to your goals. At Examzify, we believe that effective exam preparation isn't just about memorization, it's about understanding the material, identifying knowledge gaps, and building the test-taking strategies that lead to success.

This guide was designed to help you do exactly that.

Whether you're preparing for a licensing exam, professional certification, or entry-level qualification, this book offers structured practice to reinforce key concepts. You'll find a wide range of multiple-choice questions, each followed by clear explanations to help you understand not just the right answer, but why it's correct.

The content in this guide is based on real-world exam objectives and aligned with the types of questions and topics commonly found on official tests. It's ideal for learners who want to:

- Practice answering questions under realistic conditions,
- Improve accuracy and speed,
- Review explanations to strengthen weak areas, and
- Approach the exam with greater confidence.

We recommend using this book not as a stand-alone study tool, but alongside other resources like flashcards, textbooks, or hands-on training. For best results, we recommend working through each question, reflecting on the explanation provided, and revisiting the topics that challenge you most.

Remember: successful test preparation isn't about getting every question right the first time, it's about learning from your mistakes and improving over time. Stay focused, trust the process, and know that every page you turn brings you closer to success.

Let's begin.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to help you study more effectively and approach your exam with confidence. Whether you're reviewing for the first time or doing a final refresh, here's how to get the most out of your Examzify study guide:

1. Start with a Diagnostic Review

Skim through the questions to get a sense of what you know and what you need to focus on. Your goal is to identify knowledge gaps early.

2. Study in Short, Focused Sessions

Break your study time into manageable blocks (e.g. 30 - 45 minutes). Review a handful of questions, reflect on the explanations.

3. Learn from the Explanations

After answering a question, always read the explanation, even if you got it right. It reinforces key points, corrects misunderstandings, and teaches subtle distinctions between similar answers.

4. Track Your Progress

Use bookmarks or notes (if reading digitally) to mark difficult questions. Revisit these regularly and track improvements over time.

5. Simulate the Real Exam

Once you're comfortable, try taking a full set of questions without pausing. Set a timer and simulate test-day conditions to build confidence and time management skills.

6. Repeat and Review

Don't just study once, repetition builds retention. Re-attempt questions after a few days and revisit explanations to reinforce learning. Pair this guide with other Examzify tools like flashcards, and digital practice tests to strengthen your preparation across formats.

There's no single right way to study, but consistent, thoughtful effort always wins. Use this guide flexibly, adapt the tips above to fit your pace and learning style. You've got this!

Questions

- 1. Which sign indicates periumbilical ecchymosis?**
 - A. Cullen's sign**
 - B. Kehr's sign**
 - C. Murphy's sign**
 - D. Beck's triad**

- 2. What is the most common cause of fever in the acute care setting?**
 - A. Viral infections**
 - B. Autoimmune diseases**
 - C. Drug reactions**
 - D. Bacterial infections**

- 3. Which medication is commonly used in a hypertensive emergency for IV treatment?**
 - A. Nitroglycerin 5-1000 mcg/min**
 - B. Atenolol 25-50 mg IV**
 - C. Bisoprolol 5-10 mg IV**
 - D. Enalapril 1.25-5 mg IV**

- 4. What is the primary focus of Change Theory in healthcare?**
 - A. Standardizing patient care protocols**
 - B. Evaluating healthcare outcomes**
 - C. Guiding the development of interventions**
 - D. Training healthcare professionals**

- 5. Cushing's triad is an indication of what condition?**
 - A. Cardiac tamponade**
 - B. Increased intracranial pressure**
 - C. Acute cholecystitis**
 - D. Hemorrhagic shock**

- 6. Which bleeding disorder is known to disproportionately affect males due to its sex-linked recessive nature?**
- A. Hemophilia**
 - B. Von Willebrand disease**
 - C. Thrombocytopenia**
 - D. Hemolytic anemia**
- 7. Signs of right-sided heart failure are typically associated with which area of the body?**
- A. Lungs**
 - B. Heart**
 - C. Abdomen**
 - D. Ankles**
- 8. What do the stages of heart failure from the American College of Cardiology describe?**
- A. Type of treatment required**
 - B. Severity of heart disease**
 - C. Patient's age**
 - D. Physical activity levels**
- 9. What condition is indicated by the Psoas sign?**
- A. Cholecystitis**
 - B. Appendicitis**
 - C. Cholangitis**
 - D. Pancreatitis**
- 10. What is the typical hematocrit (Hct) range for a female patient?**
- A. 30-40%**
 - B. 36-46%**
 - C. 42-52%**
 - D. 45-55%**

Answers

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1. A
2. D
3. A
4. C
5. B
6. A
7. D
8. B
9. B
10. B

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Explanations

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1. Which sign indicates periumbilical ecchymosis?

- A. Cullen's sign**
- B. Kehr's sign**
- C. Murphy's sign**
- D. Beck's triad**

Cullen's sign is associated with periumbilical ecchymosis, which is the presence of bruising around the navel. This sign is significant in clinical practice as it can indicate the presence of intra-abdominal bleeding, particularly in cases of hemorrhagic pancreatitis or ruptured ectopic pregnancy. When bleeding occurs in the abdominal cavity, the blood can track through the tissue planes, resulting in discoloration around the umbilicus, which is recognizable and useful for medical diagnosis. In contrast, Kehr's sign refers to referred pain in the shoulder caused by irritation of the diaphragm, Murphy's sign is used to assess for gallbladder disease by eliciting pain upon inspiration when pressure is applied under the right rib cage, and Beck's triad is a clinical finding associated with cardiac tamponade characterized by hypotension, muffled heart sounds, and jugular venous distension. Each of these other signs relates to different clinical conditions but does not indicate periumbilical ecchymosis.

2. What is the most common cause of fever in the acute care setting?

- A. Viral infections**
- B. Autoimmune diseases**
- C. Drug reactions**
- D. Bacterial infections**

Fever is a common clinical manifestation in the acute care setting, and understanding its underlying causes is crucial for effective patient management. Bacterial infections are recognized as the most prevalent cause of fever among patients in acute care. The pathophysiology behind this is the body's response to bacterial invasion, which triggers the immune system to release pyrogens—substances that induce fever as a mechanism to fight off the infection. In acute care settings, bacterial infections can arise from various sources, including pneumonia, urinary tract infections, and bloodstream infections, among others. The systemic inflammatory response to these infections often results in elevated body temperature, making it a key sign that necessitates timely intervention and treatment. Other causes of fever, such as viral infections, autoimmune diseases, and drug reactions, are indeed present in acute care contexts but are not as frequent as bacterial infections. Consequently, identifying bacterial infections as the primary cause allows healthcare professionals to prioritize diagnostic testing and initiate appropriate antibiotic therapy, ensuring a more effective management of febrile patients in acute settings.

3. Which medication is commonly used in a hypertensive emergency for IV treatment?

A. Nitroglycerin 5-1000 mcg/min

B. Atenolol 25-50 mg IV

C. Bisoprolol 5-10 mg IV

D. Enalapril 1.25-5 mg IV

Nitroglycerin is commonly used in hypertensive emergencies for intravenous treatment due to its potent vasodilatory effects. When administered as a continuous IV infusion, it can quickly reduce blood pressure by relaxing vascular smooth muscle and increasing venous capacitance. This helps to decrease systemic vascular resistance and promote improved cardiac output, making it particularly effective in conditions where immediate blood pressure reduction is required, such as acute heart failure or severe hypertension. Additionally, nitroglycerin's rapid onset and short half-life allow for precise titration to achieve the desired blood pressure target without the prolonged effects seen with some other antihypertensive agents. This makes it particularly suitable in emergency settings where blood pressure management must be handled swiftly and effectively.

4. What is the primary focus of Change Theory in healthcare?

A. Standardizing patient care protocols

B. Evaluating healthcare outcomes

C. Guiding the development of interventions

D. Training healthcare professionals

The primary focus of Change Theory in healthcare centers around guiding the development of interventions. Change Theory provides a structured framework for understanding how and why changes occur within healthcare settings. By utilizing this theory, healthcare professionals can design and implement effective strategies aimed at improving patient care, optimizing processes, and facilitating organizational transformation. This emphasis on the development of interventions is critical because it helps to identify the necessary steps to take in order to achieve desired outcomes and ensure that the changes introduced are sustainable. These interventions take into account various factors, including the needs of patients, the capabilities of healthcare providers, and the broader healthcare environment. While standardizing patient care protocols, evaluating healthcare outcomes, and training healthcare professionals are all important components of clinical practice, they do not encompass the broader purpose of Change Theory, which is to strategically inform and guide the creation and implementation of effective interventions that lead to meaningful change in healthcare delivery.

5. Cushing's triad is an indication of what condition?

- A. Cardiac tamponade
- B. Increased intracranial pressure**
- C. Acute cholecystitis
- D. Hemorrhagic shock

Cushing's triad is a clinical syndrome indicating increased intracranial pressure. This triad is characterized by three key signs: hypertension (elevated blood pressure), bradycardia (decreased heart rate), and irregular or abnormal respirations. These symptoms arise due to the brain's autoregulation mechanisms being compromised as pressure mounts within the cranial vault. When intracranial pressure increases, the body attempts to maintain cerebral perfusion by elevating systemic blood pressure. Meanwhile, the brainstem's function may become affected, leading to bradycardia as a result of increased vagal tone. Additionally, irregular respiration patterns can occur due to pressure on the brainstem, which controls respiratory centers. This combination of signs is a critical warning that immediate medical intervention is needed to address the underlying cause of the elevated intracranial pressure to prevent severe neurological damage or death. Understanding this medical condition is vital for healthcare professionals, as recognizing Cushing's triad can be a life-saving skill in emergency and neurocritical care contexts.

6. Which bleeding disorder is known to disproportionately affect males due to its sex-linked recessive nature?

- A. Hemophilia**
- B. Von Willebrand disease
- C. Thrombocytopenia
- D. Hemolytic anemia

Hemophilia is a bleeding disorder that is known to disproportionately affect males due to its sex-linked recessive nature, specifically related to mutations on the X chromosome. Since males have one X and one Y chromosome, if they inherit the affected X chromosome, they will express the disorder because they do not have a second X chromosome that could potentially compensate for the defective gene. In contrast, females have two X chromosomes, so even if they inherit one affected X chromosome, they often have a normal copy on the other chromosome which may mitigate the effects of the disorder. This leads to a lower prevalence of hemophilia in females. The most common forms of hemophilia, such as Hemophilia A and Hemophilia B, feature deficiencies in specific clotting factors, leading to increased bleeding tendencies which can be severe. In contrast, other bleeding disorders such as Von Willebrand disease, thrombocytopenia, and hemolytic anemia do not have the same mode of inheritance and do not specifically affect males to the same extent as hemophilia. Von Willebrand disease, for example, can affect both genders fairly equally, while thrombocytopenia and hemolytic anemia have various causes and effects that are not linked to a sex-specific gene.

7. Signs of right-sided heart failure are typically associated with which area of the body?

- A. Lungs**
- B. Heart**
- C. Abdomen**
- D. Ankles**

Signs of right-sided heart failure are primarily associated with fluid congestion and the resultant physiological changes that occur when the right side of the heart is unable to effectively pump blood. When this happens, blood backs up into the systemic circulation, leading to various symptoms throughout the body. One of the most common manifestations of right-sided heart failure includes peripheral edema, which often presents as swelling in the lower extremities, particularly the ankles and legs. This occurs because the increased pressure in the venous system causes fluid to leak from the blood vessels into the surrounding tissues. While there may be signs of right-sided heart failure impacting other areas, such as the abdomen (due to conditions like ascites), and some systemic effects may occur, the classic swelling observed in the ankles is a direct and characteristic sign often used in clinical assessments to identify right-sided heart failure. This makes the ankles a standout location for observable signs of this condition.

8. What do the stages of heart failure from the American College of Cardiology describe?

- A. Type of treatment required**
- B. Severity of heart disease**
- C. Patient's age**
- D. Physical activity levels**

The stages of heart failure as defined by the American College of Cardiology focus on the severity of heart disease. This classification system ranges from Stage A, where patients are at risk for developing heart failure, to Stage D, which indicates advanced heart failure requiring specialized interventions. Each stage helps healthcare professionals understand how far the disease has progressed, enabling them to tailor treatment and management plans accordingly. Understanding the severity of heart failure is crucial because it influences patient prognosis and treatment strategies. For instance, a patient in Stage A may only need lifestyle modifications and monitoring, while a Stage D patient may require more intensive therapies, such as medications, hospitalization, or even heart transplant considerations. The other options do not accurately reflect the purpose of the heart failure staging system. While treatment type, patient age, and physical activity levels can be relevant in managing heart failure, the primary focus of the ACC stages is to categorize the severity of the condition itself.

9. What condition is indicated by the Psoas sign?

- A. Cholecystitis
- B. Appendicitis**
- C. Cholangitis
- D. Pancreatitis

The Psoas sign is a clinical indicator that suggests the presence of appendicitis. It is assessed by having the patient flex their right hip against resistance or extending the right leg while lying on their back. If this movement elicits abdominal pain, it indicates irritation of the iliopsoas muscle associated with inflamed appendix tissue, supporting the diagnosis of appendicitis. In relation to the other conditions listed: cholecystitis typically presents with right upper quadrant pain, Murphy's sign, and maybe referred pain to the right shoulder but is not associated with the Psoas sign. Cholangitis may be indicated by fever, jaundice, and right upper quadrant pain, and it does not elicit the Psoas sign. Pancreatitis usually presents with abdominal pain and may involve other signs of gastrointestinal distress but is unrelated to the Psoas sign, which specifically points to appendiceal issues. Hence, the connection of the Psoas sign with appendicitis makes it the correct choice in this context.

10. What is the typical hematocrit (Hct) range for a female patient?

- A. 30-40%
- B. 36-46%**
- C. 42-52%
- D. 45-55%

The typical hematocrit range for a female patient is 36-46%. Hematocrit measures the percentage of blood volume that is made up of red blood cells and is an important indicator of overall blood health. For females, the normal range accounts for physiological differences, including lower red blood cell mass compared to males due to factors such as body size and hormonal influences. The 36-46% range reflects the average values seen in the general female population and aligns with established medical references for female patients. Understanding normal hematocrit levels is crucial for identifying potential conditions such as anemia (often indicated by low hematocrit) or polycythemia (high hematocrit), both of which can have significant clinical implications. Other ranges provided do not accurately represent the normal values for females and could lead to misunderstandings in clinical assessments or implications for patient health.

Next Steps

Congratulations on reaching the final section of this guide. You've taken a meaningful step toward passing your certification exam and advancing your career.

As you continue preparing, remember that consistent practice, review, and self-reflection are key to success. Make time to revisit difficult topics, simulate exam conditions, and track your progress along the way.

If you need help, have suggestions, or want to share feedback, we'd love to hear from you. Reach out to our team at hello@examzify.com.

Or visit your dedicated course page for more study tools and resources:

<https://aacn.examzify.com>

We wish you the very best on your exam journey. You've got this!