

Making sure there are enough nursing staff in adult wards in hospitals

Information for the public

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About this information

NICE guidelines provide advice on the care and support that should be offered to people who use health and care services.

This information explains the advice from NICE about how hospitals should make sure wards have enough nursing staff to give patients the care they need, at all times of the day and night, every day of the week ([NICE guideline SG1](#)). The information only covers nursing staff for inpatient wards that provide care for adults in 'acute hospitals' (most of the hospitals in the NHS). It does not cover wards in community hospitals, day care units, intensive care units, maternity units, accident and emergency departments, or mental health wards.

In this information, 'nursing staff' means registered nurses and healthcare assistants.

Registered nurses have to be registered with the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

Healthcare assistants are not registered nurses. They work with nurses and other healthcare professionals, helping with care and looking after patients' comfort and wellbeing. The work they do varies, depending on the ward they are working on and the training they have done.

Nursing means the wide range of care that patients need when they are in hospital. It doesn't just cover giving medicines and other treatments, but also things like helping patients eat and drink, or walk to the bathroom or toilet.

Deciding how many nurses and healthcare assistants are needed on the ward

NICE says that hospitals should have a system to work out how many registered nurses and healthcare assistants are required on a ward. The system should focus on being able to give patients the care they need.

It's important that the system allows for working out the nursing staff needed on each ward, because not all wards are the same. For example, some wards may mostly have patients who need to be given lots of medicines and other treatments. Other wards may be more likely to have many patients who need help with eating and drinking.

The system hospitals use should measure how much nursing time each patient on the ward needs over 24 hours.

It should then add on the time nursing staff need for the parts of their job that aren't directly caring for patients. This includes time to talk to patients' relatives, have meetings with doctors and other staff to discuss a patient's care, and train other members of the nursing team.

Hospitals should then use the calculations to decide the nursing staff they need at different times of the day and night. This includes considering what care could be done by healthcare assistants, supervised by nurses. The registered nurses on the ward are always responsible for the overall care of patients.

Long-term planning about how to staff a ward

Hospitals need to plan ahead to make sure that they are employing enough registered nurses and healthcare assistants to give patients the nursing care they need.

For long-term planning and setting budgets, hospitals can use lots of daily calculations of how much nursing time is needed on the ward to work out an average. This can help them to budget for how many registered nurses and healthcare assistants they need to employ on the ward.

Checking there are enough nursing staff available on the day or night

Sometimes there may not be enough nursing staff available on a ward to provide the care needed by the patients. This could be because the ward has more patients who need more nursing than usual, or for reasons such as staff being off sick.

NICE says that the registered nurse in charge of the ward or the shift should check that there are enough nursing staff available to provide the care patients need at any time of the day or night. One sign that there may not be enough staff is that there is a shortage of more than 8 hours or at least a quarter of the registered nursing time needed compared with the registered nurse time that is available. But the nurse in charge should also look out for things that may indicate that there are not enough nursing staff to give patients the care they need, including those in the box below.

Signs that there may not be enough nursing staff available on the ward

Patients are not given their medicines at the times they should be.

Patients have to wait more than 30 minutes to get the pain relief they are due to be given.

Temperature, blood pressure, pulse and other 'vital signs' are not taken when they should be (as set out in the patient's notes).

Other regular checks are not done, such as:

- asking patients about any pain
- helping patients go to the toilet or bathroom
- making sure patients can reach what they need
- making sure patients are comfortable
- checking if patients are at risk of pressure ulcers and taking steps to stop the pressure ulcers developing.

There are fewer than 2 registered nurses present on the ward during a shift.

Each hospital should have a policy for what the nurse in charge of the ward should do if there are not enough nursing staff to give the patients the care they need. The nurse in charge needs to be able to get quick action to solve the problem. The action might include bringing more nursing staff to the ward straightaway.

See [What you can do](#) for information about what patients, relatives or carers can do if they think there is a problem.

Responsibilities of hospital senior managers

The hospital board and senior managers are responsible for having a plan in place to make sure patients have the nursing care they need even at the busiest times of day. The plan should cover

dealing with problems such as when members of staff are unwell and away from work or when there are more patients than usual on the ward who are very ill.

Hospitals should have a clear procedure for taking action if there are not enough nursing staff on a ward to provide the care patients need.

Monitoring

Hospitals should collect information to help them check whether they have the right number of nursing staff. This information may be collected using a form for patients to fill in to give feedback about their experience while they were in hospital. It might include questions about pain control and how nursing staff talked to patients and explained about their care and treatment.

Hospitals should also keep records of the following:

- any falls a patient has while in hospital
- any pressure ulcers that develop or get worse after a patient has been admitted to hospital
- care not being provided when it should be (see the box in [Checking there are enough nursing staff available on the day or night](#))
- how many registered nurses and healthcare assistants work on the wards every day, and how this compares with the amount of nursing care needed
- how often nursing staff have to miss their breaks or work overtime to provide adequate care.

Hospital managers should regularly look at this information to see if there are any problems, and they should use it when they are doing their long-term planning.

NICE says that there isn't a fixed number of patients each registered nurse should care for. The nursing staff needed depends on how much nursing care the patients on the ward need.

There is some evidence that there is more chance of things going wrong for patients if a registered nurse is looking after more than 8 patients during the day shifts.

So if the monitoring shows that a ward has registered nurses who are caring for more than 8 patients each during the day shifts, hospital managers need to keep a particularly careful look out for signs that patients aren't getting the nursing care they need. It may not be a problem – there are some situations where registered nurses can safely care for more than 8 patients.

What you can do

If a patient, relative or carer spots something that suggests there are not enough nursing staff on a ward, they should report it to the nurse in charge of the ward at the time.

The box in [Checking there are enough nursing staff available on the day or night](#) gives information about signs that there might not be enough nursing staff available to give patients the nursing care they need.

You might be asked to give feedback about your experience of being in hospital. Your opinion and comments, good or bad, will help the hospital work out how well they are doing and make changes if needed.

If you have concerns about the care you received in hospital, you can talk to the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). Most hospitals have a PALS office. There is information about PALS and how to make a complaint on [NHS Choices](#).

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