

NEW GRAD NURSE SURVIVAL CHECKLIST

What actually matters before, during & after your first shifts



RN Transition to Practice

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You made it through nursing school. Now comes the part they didn't fully prepare you for. This checklist covers the practical, emotional, and clinical things that make the difference in your first weeks. Check off each item as you go — and breathe.

☀ Before your first shift

- ☐ Tour the unit — know where supplies, crash cart, and clean utility rooms are
- ☐ Save key phone numbers: charge nurse, pharmacy, rapid response
- ☐ Review your hospital's chain of command (know who to escalate to)
- ☐ Practice logging into the EMR and pulling up a chart
- ☐ Print or download your hospital's most common order sets
- ☐ Prepare your 'brain sheet' template for patient organization
- ☐ Buy comfortable shoes you can stand in for 12+ hours
- ☐ Eat a real meal before every shift — you may not get a break
- ☐ Set your intention: 'I am here to learn, not to be perfect'

⚠ Clinical red flags to know cold

- ☐ Sudden change in mental status — always investigate immediately
- ☐ Respiratory rate > 25 or < 10 — reassess and escalate
- ☐ Systolic BP < 90 or drop > 30 from baseline
- ☐ O2 sat falling despite supplemental oxygen
- ☐ Patient says 'I feel like something is wrong' — take it seriously
- ☐ Urine output < 0.5 mL/kg/hr for 2+ hours
- ☐ New onset chest pain: STEMI, PE, aortic dissection until proven otherwise
- ☐ Potassium > 6.0 or < 3.0 — notify provider before giving meds

✓ During orientation

- ☐ Ask your preceptor how they prefer to be approached with questions
- ☐ Write down every question — look up answers at home, ask next shift
- ☐ Never skip your medication rights check. Every. Single. Time.
- ☐ Read back verbal orders to the physician before hanging up
- ☐ Use SBAR every time you call a provider — even when nervous
- ☐ Debrief one situation with your preceptor after every shift
- ☐ Track every new skill in your competency log

♥ Taking care of yourself

- ☐ Build a post-shift decompression ritual and actually use it
- ☐ Talk to someone outside nursing about non-work things
- ☐ Identify one trusted colleague you can vent to safely
- ☐ Take your days off completely off — no charting, no worrying
- ☐ Notice if you're crying before every shift — that's a sign to talk to someone
- ☐ You will make mistakes. Debrief them, learn, and move forward
- ☐ Re-read why you became a nurse on the hardest days

- ☐ Ask 'what's the worst that could happen?' when prioritizing patients
- ☐ Advocate for your patients even when it feels uncomfortable
- ☐ Document in real time — never rely on memory at end of shift

Phrases that help

"I'm not sure — let me find out and get back to you."

"I'm concerned about my patient and need you to come assess."

"Can I talk through this situation with you?"

"I'm going to read that order back to confirm."

"I need a minute before I respond to that."

You were made for this. Keep going.

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