

Respiratory Therapist

Keep people breathing: ventilators, oxygen, blood gases and the worst nights in the hospital. Two years of college to get licensed.

TYPICAL PAY

\$82,280

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$64k to \$118k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

2 to 4 years

after high school

DEMAND

Very high

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Hospitals, intensive care units, emergency departments, sleep la...

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 11 and 12
 Biology, chemistry, algebra and physics. Physics matters more here than in most health careers, because you spend your life on gases and pressure.
- 2 Get into an accredited program** Apply a year ahead
 It must be accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Respiratory Care, or the national exams are closed to you. Most are associate degrees at community colleges; some are bachelor's degrees.
- 3 Classroom, lab and clinical rotations** 2 years
 Lung anatomy, ventilator mechanics, blood gas analysis and pharmacology, alongside hundreds of supervised hours in real hospital units.
- 4 Pass the board exams** 2 to 4 months
 The entry exam leads to the CRT (Certified Respiratory Therapist) credential. Score above the higher cut and sit a clinical simulation exam and you earn the RRT (Registered Respiratory Therapist), which most hospitals now require.
- 5 State license and first job** 1 to 3 months
 Apply to your state's licensing board, then join a hospital respiratory department, usually with several months of supervised orientation.

Pros and cons

- + Licensed and earning above \$60,000 two years after high school
- + Small debt against a strong salary
- + Three-day working weeks are standard
- Nights, weekends and holidays, for years
- You are there when people die, often at the head of the bed
- Twelve hours of walking, lifting and running between floors

Good to know

Two credentials, one job title

The national board issues a certified level and a registered level from the same entry exam: score above the higher cut, sit a clinical simulation exam, and you are registered. Most hospitals now advertis...

You are on the emergency team from day one

When a patient stops breathing anywhere in the hospital, the respiratory therapist is part of the response and usually takes the airway. Few two-year qualifications put you at the center of a crisis t...

Optional boosts

Adult critical care specialist. Neonatal and pediatric specialist. Sleep disorders specialist. Pulmonary function technologist.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Respiratory Therapists, wages and tasks
 NBRC, the National Board for Respiratory Care
 CoARC, the Commission on Accreditation for Respiratory Care
 Valencia College: health sciences associate degrees

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/respiratory-therapist>



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