

Camp Nursing

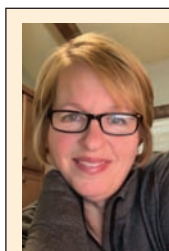
These nurses serve millions of youths all year round.

Nurses are rarely introduced to unique roles such as camp nursing. Most camp nurses find this calling in unexpected ways. In my case, while working in acute pediatric services, I was invited by another nurse to help perform venipunctures at a special needs camp. I was thrilled to find a way to use this skill outside of an acute care setting. That was in 1996, and I haven't missed a summer since.

U.S. camps serve over 15 million youths during the summer, and there is an ever-present need for qualified, trained health care providers who thrive in community-based youth settings. Camp is the term often ascribed to any youth-serving experience outside of the school setting. This applies to the arts, sports, special needs, the YMCA, scouting, faith-based activities, and many others. There are also camps for youths with specific health care needs—such as those with significant burn injuries—that offer opportunities to grow, learn, and connect.

What we do. Camp nursing offers nurses a unique opportunity to make a difference in the lives of children who desperately need a space that promotes safety, love, and respect. Camp nurses typically serve from a week or a few weeks or months to year-round. People often think all camp nurses do is “treat boo-boos with Band-Aids,” but our role is quite complex. We work largely in the areas of health promotion (ventilation, hydration, skin protection) and prevention (communicable disease planning, emergency preparedness). This means that while caring for minor injuries and illnesses, we are also prepared for challenges such as lost campers, weather events, loss of electricity, remote living, and other significant situations.

Why this specialty? What keeps us returning year after year? Nurses have the training and desire to influence the well-being of young people, but time is often a limiting factor—especially when working in a hospital or clinic setting. Too many patients, not enough nurses. The camp environment creates a space that promotes engagement, courage, and joy. Camps offer at least a full week (and often more) to just “be” with children, listen and learn, and partner with them in ways that promote their mental, emotional, and social health (often called MESH).



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Becoming a camp nurse is quite simple. Most importantly, the nurse needs a desire to work with young people as they navigate developmental milestones. A camp nurse should feel comfortable working in remote locations and have confidence in their assessment and intervention skills. The health care team at camp may be quite robust or small and mighty. In either situation, the nurse needs sound confidence in clinical practice.

Connecting with colleagues.

The professional organization for camp nursing is the Alliance for Camp Health (ACH; <https://allianceforcamphealth.org>).

ACH's mission is to promote healthier camp communities. There is currently no certification for camp nursing, but ACH produces important resources to help guide practice, including a basics of camp nursing textbook, practice guidelines, communicable disease guidance, and more. ACH also invests in critical research to build a body of knowledge on this specialty practice.

Challenges. One of the most pressing clinical issues facing camp nursing is MESH. Today's youth are dealing with more MESH challenges than ever. Research conducted by ACH in 2021 and 2022 identified youths' challenges with anxiety, emotional regulation, and loss of socialization skills. In 2022, ACH published the 90-page *MESH Resource Guide* along with a pocket guide to address these findings. These resources help camps address MESH through improving health history forms and parent communication, and by developing interventions and deescalation plans for these conditions.

Interested in camp nursing? We have the best uniforms (a T-shirt and shorts every day), function in the great outdoors, and are always learning the culture of our youth. This position sometimes requires long hours, yet it is highly rewarding and full of fun. You can find job postings, research, and education on the ACH website or email ach@allianceforcamphealth.org. It's time for a new adventure. We look forward to seeing you on our next hike! ▼

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