

Respiratory therapists help care for patients with airway and breathing problems. They operate invasive and noninvasive ventilators, perform cardiopulmonary testing, deliver treatments, and evaluate how patients react to therapy. They often set up, operate and train others on devices, such as ventilators, oxygen therapy systems, environmental control systems and aerosol generators. At hospitals, respiratory therapists provide emergency care, such as artificial respiration, external cardiac massage or assistance with cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Most ambulatory respiratory therapists focus on pulmonary fitness and sleep apnea. Like many health care professions, respiratory therapy continues to specialize, with greatest demand in neonatal and pediatric care.

OUTLOOK

COVID-19 has drawn greater attention to the role of respiratory therapists. Even before COVID-19, the Department of Labor estimated up to a 19% increase in demand from 2019 to 2029. The aging population will increase demand for respiratory therapy services and treatments, mostly in hospitals. This trend is driven by older patients having more respiratory conditions such as pneumonia and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Also, a growing emphasis on reducing readmissions in hospitals may result in more demand for respiratory therapists in nursing homes and ambulatory settings.

EDUCATION AND ADVANCED TRAINING

Kaiser Permanente has many levels of respiratory support, from technicians to physicians. This profile focuses only on registered therapists. (Note: Respiratory care practitioners who received a license after 2008 can't be licensed in California. In Southern California, Kaiser Permanente only hires registered respiratory therapists.)

Some Kaiser Permanente regions/markets also use pulmonary function technicians. These positions generally require an associate degree in respiratory therapy. Pulmonary function technicians operate and maintain equipment, gather reports, organize supplies, and provide patient education.

Foundational education

- » Vocational degree or associate degree

Advanced education

- » Bachelor's degree or higher
- » State licensure required
- » National Board for Respiratory Care certification

In-demand specialty certification

- » Neonatal-pediatrics
- » Adult critical care
- » Advanced practice respiratory therapist

CREDENTIALS AND ASSOCIATIONS

In the future, a bachelor's degree will likely be required to support critical thinking and to incorporate continuous scientific and technological advances.

Registered respiratory therapist (RRT):

Demonstrates highest level of knowledge, skills and abilities related to respiratory care protocols, patient assessments and equipment. Must pass multiple choice and simulation exam.

Professional associations

- » American Association for Respiratory Care (provides continued and specialty education)
- » American Thoracic Society (provides clinical resources and specialty education)
- » National Board for Respiratory Care (provides RRT, CRT, RPFT and CPFT certifications)
- » Commission on Accreditation for Respiratory Care (accredits education programs)

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Care settings

- » **Inpatient:** Majority of jobs within hospital
- » **Outpatient:** Ambulatory and nursing homes

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TAKE ACTION

Employees: Explore career paths at kpcareerplanning.org/paths. Partnership union members can talk with an education trust career counselor: Ben Hudnall Memorial Trust (bhmt.org/career-coaching) or SEIU UHW-West and Joint Employer Education Fund (theadfund.org/cc).

Managers: Adapt to emerging trends. Talk with a Workforce of the Future implementation specialist to discuss training and education opportunities (kpcareerplanning.org/prd/contact_us.php).

CURRENT CORE JOB SKILLS

- » Manage life support mechanical ventilation systems
- » Administer aerosol-based medications
- » Monitor equipment related to cardiopulmonary therapy
- » Analyze blood samples to determine levels of oxygen and other gases
- » Manage artificial airways
- » Assess lung capacity to determine impairment
- » Analyze chest X-rays and sputum specimens
- » Assess vital signs
- » Perform tests and studies related to the cardiopulmonary system (such as stress tests)
- » Conduct rehabilitation activities
- » Counsel individuals in cardiopulmonary health (such as asthma education and smoking cessation)
- » Consult with physicians, nurses and other team members to recommend a change in therapy
- » Provide care through virtual visits (such as phone, video and email)
- » Care team and patient training
- » Medical record documentation

FUTURE CORE SKILLS

- » Setting will expand to home
- » Perform tasks remotely (remote patient monitoring)
- » Work with little supervision
- » Refined written and oral communication skills
- » Advanced device programming, monitoring and maintenance skills as technology becomes more specialized
- » Customer service
- » Critical thinking
- » Problem-solving
- » Population health
- » Hospital readmission management
- » Detail oriented
- » Interpersonal skills
- » Collaboration

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

- » Specialties will expand, particularly in case management/care coordination, COPD and pediatrics
- » Advanced training will become norm, more professionals will get bachelor- or master-level training
- » Increased scope of practice will lead the way to advanced practice respiratory therapists, who will work under supervising physician delegation agreements in order to diagnose and treat patients

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