



# Neonatal Therapy Certification Candidate Handbook

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This Candidate Handbook provides prospective Neonatal Therapy Certification examination candidates with an overview of the mission, vision, objectives, and purpose of the Neonatal Therapy Certification Board (NTCB<sup>®</sup>), as well as the application process.

Further information on examination development, administration, security, and scoring procedures is documented in the NTCB Exam Manual. Requirements and procedures related to maintenance of certification, including recertification pathways, application submission, audits, and certification status options, are addressed in the NTCB Recertification Handbook.

## **Neonatal Therapy Certification Overview**

### Mission Statement

The mission of the NTCB is to recognize and advance interprofessional and international neonatal therapy practice by developing evidence-based certification standards, including validating the clinical experience and knowledge essential to the effective delivery of neonatal therapy.

### Vision Statement

The vision of the NTCB is to establish a body of certified neonatal physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech-language pathologists (PTs, OTs, and SLPs) who provide safe, effective, and evidence-based services to at-risk infants and their families.

### Objective

The Neonatal Therapy Certification Examination evaluates a candidate's ability to integrate knowledge, clinical reasoning, and professional judgment essential for the safe, effective, and evidence-based delivery of neonatal therapy. The examination measures competencies at the foundational level of independent NICU practice, confirming that candidates possess the knowledge and clinical expertise required for autonomous neonatal therapy services.

### Purpose of a Neonatal Therapy Certification

Neonatal therapy certification identifies PTs, OTs, and SLPs who have demonstrated the necessary experience, knowledge, and commitment to serve high-risk infants in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU).

Neonatal therapy is recognized as an advanced practice area by the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA), the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), as it requires specialized training and skills to balance therapeutic interventions with medical complications and the vulnerability of the developing, high-risk infant. The neonatal therapy certification is offered as a foundational certification that aims to ensure the basic training and knowledge necessary for independent practice in the NICU.

A certification is designed to assess the fundamental knowledge and skills required to perform a specific job. When an individual successfully passes a certification examination, they can declare professional competence in a specialized area of practice. A profession is strengthened when performance standards are established, and voluntary certification programs are available to recognize competence within a specialty area. While certification is voluntary, the value it adds to the profession is essential to promote a minimum level of competency for NICU therapists. Certification in neonatal therapy identifies therapists who have demonstrated specialized knowledge and skills consistent with the expectations of independent practice.

### Definition of a Neonatal Therapist

A neonatal therapist is a PT, OT, or SLP who delivers holistic, direct patient care and consultative services to premature and medically complex infants in a NICU. Neonatal therapists play a vital role in the NICU team. All disciplines make unique contributions toward improving outcomes for high-risk infants in the NICU.

Using an integrated, neuroprotective, family-centered model, neonatal therapists provide highly specialized and individualized therapeutic interventions to support optimal long-term development, prevent adverse sequelae, and nurture the infant-family dyad. Neonatal therapists also provide education to the family and NICU team. \*Definition from NANT

### Affiliation

The NTCB maintains a distinct leadership structure separate from that of all other organizations. A collaborative-only partnership exists with the National Association of Neonatal Therapists (NANT). The NTCB is endorsed by NANT.

### Equal Standards

No specific individuals or groups of therapists are exempt from taking the initial certification exam, regardless of years of experience, expertise, or other factors. All applicants must meet the requirements, submit the required documentation, and take the examination. Other NICU staff, such as music therapists, psychologists, developmental specialists, nurses, and other

professionals, may share some common knowledge; however, training and expertise differ across fields. Therefore, only neonatal PTs, OTs, and SLPs are eligible for the neonatal therapist examination and CNT designation.

### Certified Neonatal Therapist Designation

Therapists who meet all requirements and pass the certification exam will earn the Certified Neonatal Therapist (CNT<sup>®</sup>) designation.

Once a candidate passes the exam, he or she may begin using the CNT designation after their name and credentials. Duplicate CNT certificates can be downloaded at any time from the NTCB applicant portal. Candidates are encouraged to save a copy of the official certification notification received via email. After passing the exam, the therapist's name will be added to the NTCB website's public list of certified therapists. Access to a private CNT Facebook page is also provided as a professional networking benefit.

Only individuals who have earned CNT certification from the NTCB and who maintain their certification in good standing may use the credential in professional documents, publications, and communications. Individuals must immediately discontinue use of the CNT designation if their certification expires, lapses, is suspended, or is revoked. Individuals who have not earned certification may not use the credential under any circumstances. Unauthorized, misleading, or fraudulent use, including falsely claiming certification or failing to remove the designation after expiration, is strictly prohibited. Suspected misuse can be reported to the NTCB at any time by using the contact information provided on the NTCB website. The NTCB will investigate all reports of improper use and take necessary corrective actions, which may include requiring removal of the designation, issuing sanctions, revoking certification, or pursuing legal action to protect the integrity of the CNT credential.

### Fees

The application fee is \$250 and must be paid prior to submitting your certification application. The examination fee is \$445, bringing the total cost of certification to \$695. Therapists applying together in groups of two or more are eligible for a \$50 discount on the exam fee per person, provided that each individual indicates the joint application on their submission and all applications are received within 48 hours of one another.

If the applicant fails the exam on the first attempt, a reduced examination fee of \$250 is offered for a second administration. The fees ensure adequate technical and office support throughout the application process, including submission, careful review, eligibility determination, and status notification.

## **Initial Certification**

### Portfolio Submission

Applicants will be required to submit a portfolio on the online application platform at [My Applicant Portal - NTCB](#). The examination application cycle can be completed biannually, from March 15th to May 15th and from September 15th to November 15th. For assistance with technical issues related to the application, please contact [support@rsnlcreative.com](mailto:support@rsnlcreative.com).

Each applicant will receive a unique CNT number, consisting of the letters ‘CNT,’ followed by the two-digit year in which the applicant was approved to take the exam, and then a three-digit number indicating their position in that year (i.e., CNT17001, CNT17002, etc.).

### Certification Eligibility

For therapists licensed in the United States, a valid and current professional PT, OT, or SLP license, neonatal clinical experience, and relevant continuing education are required to take the exam and to maintain an active certification status. International therapists must demonstrate qualifications and neonatal experience that meet the requirements for neonatal therapists in the United States and will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis for certification eligibility. Verification of credentials will be required, and the applicant may need to facilitate the verification process.

### Application Requirements

#### *Professional Credentialing*

The applicant must be a PT, OT, or SLP who has maintained a current professional credential for at least 3 years. The professional credential may consist of a license or registration, depending on the legal requirements in the location where the applicant practices. If the applicant practices in a country that does not issue a professional credential for practice, the applicant must provide information about the requirements for practicing in that location and evidence of compliance with those requirements. The applicant must have entered practice as a credential professional at least three years prior to the application.

#### *NICU Clinical Experience*

A minimum of 3500 hours of direct clinical practice in the NICU setting must be accrued prior to applying for certification. Hours of NICU practice must be accrued from work in a level II, III, or IV NICU (based on criteria for NICU level in the United States) or a setting that is equivalent to these levels. Up to 1000 of these hours may include working with infants less than three months of age in the hospital setting, outside the NICU. Initial examination applicants may meet the minimum requirement of 3,500 hours of experience as a neonatal therapist over various time frames. Fellowship or internship hours completed after full

licensure can be used toward clinical practice hours. However, hours spent in an internship, fellowship, or apprenticeship before the applicant becomes licensed do *not* count toward the practice hour requirement.

In the United States, candidates must hold a current, active, unrestricted license in the jurisdiction in which they practice at the time of application and while accruing NICU practice hours, and licensure must remain in good standing throughout the application and examination process. Practice hours completed under a provisional, temporary, intern, or clinical fellowship authorization, including during a Clinical Fellowship (CF) year, are not eligible, and individuals practicing under these authorizations may not apply.

### *Professional Education*

Applicants must submit 40 hours of education completed within the three years preceding the submission of their certification application. Hours include the number of education hours, not the continuing education units. Accepted education hours may include neonatal therapy courses through an educational platform that provides documentation of completion (signed letter, certificate of attendance or participation, or paid receipt), such as:

- Annual conferences [NANT, Graven's Conference on the Physical and Developmental Environment of the High-Risk Infant, National Association of Neonatal Nursing (NANN), Pediatric Academic Societies, etc.]
- Webinars related to NICU topics [NANT, Dandle Lion, Innara Health, Dr. Brown's, etc.]
- Course [Assessment of General Movements, NICU Network Neurobehavioral Scale training, Neonatal Oral Motor Assessment, Newborn Behavioral Observation, or NICU content courses through Education Resources, etc.]

Teaching a professional or continuing education course does *not* count toward education hours.

### *Mentorship*

A minimum of 40 hours of mentorship provided by an experienced NICU provider is required for certification. Mentoring is a professional relationship in which an experienced mentor assists another individual (mentee) in developing specific skills and knowledge to enhance the less experienced person's personal and professional growth. Both in-person and online mentorship experiences are accepted.

Mentorship ensures that experience is gained through mutual collaboration and direct feedback from a professional with NICU experience. Mentoring may have occurred recently or could date back to when the applicant first entered the NICU. Approved mentorship may come from the neonatologist, neonatal nurse practitioner, neonatal nurse, and/or a neonatal therapist or may include the NANT Ignite program, distance mentoring via online or phone discussion about clinical topics, or direct in-person mentoring by a neonatal therapist or other neonatal health care provider (i.e., neonatologist, neonatal nurse practitioner, or neonatal nurse). The applicant will be asked to briefly describe the hours spent on mentorship. It is recognized that some experiences may be applicable for use as education or

mentoring hours. Such experiences can be counted in either category, but cannot be used to meet both requirements.

In addition to the requirements stated above, a recent professional-style photograph (similar to a passport headshot) and an updated resume or curriculum vitae (CV) are required.

### Applicant Extension Requests

Extenuating circumstances, such as a personal illness or unforeseen family responsibilities, may qualify an applicant for a deadline extension. An extension can be applied to either the time required to complete an application or the timeframe to take the exam. The applicant is responsible for notifying the NTCB of an extension request, along with a brief explanation, in a timely manner. The appropriate board liaison, and co-chairs as needed, will review each situation on a case-by-case basis and determine if an extension is granted. The applicant will be notified of the decision within 30 days.

### Application Review

Applications will be initially reviewed by trained NTCB support staff. The candidate will be notified of any missing information and be given 30 days to submit additional requested documentation. If the requested documentation is not received within 30 days, that application will be rejected. It is the applicant's responsibility to submit valid and clear descriptions of hours, dates, and proof of licensure, registration, or other requested details. If an application is denied, the applicant may reapply after completing all certification application requirements at a one-time reduced fee of \$100.

Licensure is verified through the associated credentialing body for all applicants during the initial review process. Once all parts of the application have been received and approved by support staff, it is escalated to an NTCB applicant liaison, who approves or denies the application based on whether the applicant has met the minimum requirements.

Some applications may be escalated to the full board for review on a case-by-case basis.

### Application Audits

The NTCB randomly audits 10% of initial certification applications. Randomly chosen applicants will be notified of an audit through email. Audits include verification of practice hours through supervisor communications and the candidate uploading continuing education completion certificates. Certificates must be uploaded within seven days of the audit request. If the NTCB is unable to contact the supervisor through the provided contact information, the candidate may be asked to assist.

### Applicant Appeals

An applicant whose application is rejected due to a request for missing or additional information, not meeting the requirements, or suspected submission of falsified documents may appeal the decision. Appeals must be made in writing within 30 days of receiving the rejection notification and include a clear explanation of why the decision is being challenged. Appeals will be reviewed at the next full board meeting, at which a final determination of applicant status will be made. The applicant may opt to join the virtual board meeting for a 10-minute presentation of their case. After the conclusion of the board meeting, the NTCB will notify the applicant of the board's final decision in writing within 30 days. The applicant may reapply for neonatal therapy certification once they have met the experience, education, and mentoring criteria.

### Notification of Acceptance for the Examination

Notification of eligibility to take the exam will be provided within 90 days of submitting a fully completed certification application. The applicant has six months from the date of notification of eligibility to take the exam. Extensions for unforeseen or extenuating circumstances must be submitted to the board via email, along with supporting documentation, as appropriate (e.g., a note from a healthcare provider). The submission will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis for approval. If the extension is approved, the notification to the applicant will clearly state a specific new eligibility end date, and the candidate must schedule and take their exam by this date. If the extension is denied, the candidate will forfeit the examination fee if they do not take the test within the original six-month deadline and will need to reapply to certify at a later time.

### Legal Statement Regarding Certification

Neonatal therapy certification indicates that a neonatal therapist has met the minimum standards for clinical experience, education, and mentorship in the NICU. Certification by the NTCB does not grant authority to practice therapy beyond that granted by the state or country that issues the permission to practice. The Certified Neonatal Therapist designation does not imply that the NTCB supersedes any state or country's licensing requirements or permissions to treat patients.

Therapists who have successfully become certified by the NTCB must be aware of all stipulations in state and country practice regulations and must not practice outside the legal limits. The NTCB will not be held accountable for unsafe or unprofessional practices. It is the sole responsibility of the therapist and the professional licensing board or employer to provide oversight for breaches in appropriate practice.

## Resources for Exam Preparation

Once a candidate is approved to take the exam, a reference list of articles and books is provided to guide study. References are organized into topic areas, enabling applicants to focus their studies on specific areas of need identified in the self-assessment. Sample examination questions and examination preparation tips are in the study guide. Once the application fee is paid, additional practice questions are provided on the applicant portal.