

# **Neonatal Therapy National Certification Applicant Handbook**

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## **Section 1. Neonatal Therapy Certification Overview**

### **Definition of Neonatal Therapy Certification:**

Neonatal therapy certification identifies occupational and physical therapists and speech-language pathologists who have demonstrated the appropriate amount of experience, knowledge and commitment to serve high-risk infants in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).

### **Definition of a Neonatal Therapist per the National Association of Neonatal Therapists (NANT):**

A neonatal therapist is an occupational therapist, physical therapist, or speech-language pathologist who delivers holistic, direct patient care and consultative services to premature and medically-complex infants in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). Neonatal therapists are an essential part of the NICU team. Using an integrated, neuroprotective, family-centered model, neonatal therapists provide highly specialized and individualized therapeutic interventions in the NICU. These interventions 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.

### **Neonatal Therapy National Certification Board (NTNCB) Mission Statement:**

It is the mission of the NTNCB to recognize and advance inter-professional neonatal therapy practice through evidence-based certification standards including validation of clinical experience and knowledge essential for effective delivery of neonatal therapy.

### **Neonatal Therapy Certification Vision Statement:**

The vision of the NTNCB is to build a body of certified neonatal therapists (OT, PT, SLP) who can provide safe, effective, and evidence-based services to at-risk infants and their families.

### **What Does Certification Mean?**

Certification is designed to test the knowledge and abilities required to perform a particular job, in this case that of a neonatal therapist. When one successfully passes a certification examination, he or she can declare professional competence for a specialized area of practice. A profession is elevated if performance standards are created and a certification program is required in order to obtain employment in the specialty area. Certification in neonatal therapy identifies those therapists who have demonstrated the expertise to work independently in the NICU.

### **Why is Neonatal Therapy Certification Important?**

Neonatal therapy is considered an advanced area of practice. With growing numbers of therapists in NICUs and the need to define competencies for a neonatal therapist working with high-risk infants in this environment, the process of establishing neonatal therapy certification was initiated. A survey in 2013 indicated that there was a pool of at least 275 neonatal therapists in the US, the majority of whom agreed with the need for a certification process for neonatal therapists. In 2016, another survey revealed a pool of at least 482 neonatal therapists, 97% of whom indicated an interest in neonatal therapy certification. While application for certification is voluntary, the value added to the profession is essential to promote a minimum level of competency for the NICU therapist.

**All Applicants Held to Same Standards:**

No specific groups of individuals were or will be grandfathered into certification, based on level of experience, expertise, or otherwise. All applicants will be required to meet the same standards of portfolio submission and examination. The first certificate recipients consisted of NTNCB Board members and NANT leadership in 2017. They completed the same process of application but engaged in a pilot test for the certification exam as the psychometrics were evaluated. This meant the NTNCB took a 136-item test and the NANT leadership took a 134-item test (with six members taking an almost final 102-question version to assess the time allotment for the exam).

**The Credentialing Body:**

The credentialing body for the certification of neonatal therapists is the Neonatal Therapy National Certification Board (NTNCB).

**Relationship of NTNCB to NANT:**

The Neonatal Therapy National Certification Board (NTNCB) was established by and is a subsidiary of the National Association of Neonatal Therapists (NANT). However, due to criteria established by the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE), the NTNCB maintains a completely separate leadership structure from NANT. As with most credentialing bodies when they are in development, the NTNCB is under the parent organization and garners support from NANT. The NTNCB applauds NANT for recognizing the importance of professional certification and appreciates its role in fostering excellence in neonatal therapy.

**Certified Neonatal Therapist Acknowledgment:**

Therapists who meet the requirements for certification receive notice via email and mail with a lapel pin and certificate with the CNT designation. A web page on the neonatal therapy certification website has an updated list of certified neonatal therapists for public view. CNTs are invited to a private Facebook page for collaboration and communication with the NTNCB and other CNTs following certification status.

**Basic Versus Mastery Certification:**

Neonatal therapy is recognized as an advanced practice area by AOTA, APTA, and ASHA, as it requires specialized training and skills in balancing therapeutic interventions with medical complications and vulnerability of the developing high-risk infant. Although there is no current certification process for NICU-based therapists, several organizations have developed guidelines and defined what roles therapists should serve in the NICU. While therapy practice in the NICU implies a certain level of advanced training, and many therapists practicing in this area are master clinicians, neonatal therapy certification was developed as a basic neonatal therapy certification, based on the definition established by Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE): "A certification program is designed to test the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform a particular job, and, upon successfully passing a certification exam, to represent a declaration of a particular individual's professional competence (ICE, 2013)". While additional pathways of certification may be considered in the future, the initial neonatal therapy certification is offered as a basic certification that aims to ensure basic training and knowledge needed for independent practice in the NICU.

**Interdisciplinary Nature of Neonatal Therapy Certification:**

The therapeutic process in the NICU includes the use of an interdisciplinary team of PT, OT and SLP. All disciplines have a unique contribution to improving outcomes of the high-risk infants in the NICU, while

sharing some common knowledge that enables their participation as part of the team in the NICU setting. The neonatal therapy certification process aims to acknowledge and test the common knowledge required among the interdisciplinary team that provides therapy services in the NICU

## **Section 2. Neonatal Therapy Certification Requirements**

### **Eligibility for Certification:**

The NTNCB has developed a process of certification for occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech-language pathologists. Appropriate education and credentialing in any of the aforementioned fields is required for application for neonatal therapy certification as well as maintenance of certification status. Music therapists, psychologists, developmental specialists, nurses and other professionals may share some common knowledge, but training and expertise differ across fields. Therefore, these disciplines are not eligible for the Certified Neonatal Therapist designation.

### *International Applicants*

International applicants from the professions of occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech-language pathology will be required to demonstrate qualifications and neonatal experience commensurate with that required of neonatal therapists in the United States and will be evaluated for eligibility for certification on a case-by-case basis. Verification of credentialing will be required, and the applicant may need to facilitate the process of verification.

### **Requirements for Certification:**

#### 1. Professional Credentialing:

The applicant must be an occupational therapist, physical therapist or speech-language pathologist who has held a professional credential for one of these 3 professions for a minimum of 3 years. This credential must be current.

- The professional credential may consist of a license or registration, depending on the legal requirements in the location the applicant practices.
- If the applicant practices in a country that does not issue a professional credential to practice, the applicant must provide information about what is required to practice in that location and evidence of being in compliance with that requirement.

Due to the assimilation of knowledge following formal therapy training, the applicant must have entered practice as a credentialed professional a minimum of three years prior to application.

#### 2. NICU Clinical Experience:

A minimum of 3500 hours of direct clinical practice hours 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.

Because some therapists practice in the NICU part-time and others full time, applicants may achieve the minimum requirement of 3500 hours of experience as a neonatal therapist over different time frames.

### 3. Professional Education:

40 hours of continuing education related to neonatal care must be completed within the 3 years prior to submitting the certification application.

- Hours of professional education are the number of direct hours spent in an educational endeavor, not continuing education units.
- Applicants cannot apply teaching professional or continuing education toward the requirement for certification.
- It is the applicant's responsibility to ensure the content is related to NICU practice and to only submit applicable hours from a course that includes content in other areas.

Forty hours of education on neonatal therapy topics can be achieved through any educational platform that provides documentation (signed letter, certificate of attendance, or paid receipt) of completion and can include: attendance at an annual conference (NANT, Graven's Conference on the Physical and Developmental Environment of the High-Risk Infant, NANN, Pediatric Academic Societies, etc.); webinar (NANT, Dandle Lion, Innara Health, Dr. Brown's, etc.); continuing education on topics related to NICU (through any provider who provides proof of payment or participation), including but not limited to: Course in the Assessment of General Movements, NICU Network Neurobehavioral Scale training, Neonatal Oral Motor Assessment, Newborn Behavioral Observation, or NICU content courses through Education Resources. The NTNCB has compiled a list of educational resources to aid neonatal therapists in identifying opportunities to enrich their clinical knowledge and support their educational needs in preparation for neonatal therapy certification application. They are available here: <https://www.ntncb.com/education-resources-for-neonatal-therapists/>.

### 4. Mentoring:

A minimum of 40 hours of mentoring provided by an experienced NICU provider (i.e. Neonatologist, Neonatal Nurse Practitioner, neonatal nurse, and/or a neonatal therapist) who has assisted the applicant to develop clinical skills and knowledge important to the delivery of neonatal therapy services are required for certification.

- Mentoring ensures that experience is derived through collaboration and feedback given by others who are experienced in the NICU setting.
- Mentoring may have occurred recently or could date back to when the applicant first entered the NICU.
- Mentoring may include in-person mentoring and/or online mentoring experiences.

Mentoring is defined as a professional relationship in which an experienced mentor assists another (mentee) in developing specific skills and knowledge that will enhance the less experienced person's personal and professional growth. Mentoring is a crucial aspect of neonatal therapy certification but can be achieved in many different ways, including NANT Inns, distance mentoring via online or phone discussion about clinical topics with other neonatal therapists, or direct in-person mentoring by a neonatal therapist or other neonatal health care provider. During the application process, each applicant will sign the following statement attesting that they have met the 40-hour mentoring requirement:

“I acknowledge that mentoring is important to the growth and ongoing development of a neonatal therapist. As part of the 3500 hours of practice required for neonatal therapy certification, I attest that I participated in a minimum of 40 hours of mentored experiences in neonatal therapy. None of these mentored experiences were also counted as education hours in the application for neonatal therapy certification.”

It is recognized that some experiences may be applicable to use as mentoring or education hours. Such experiences can be counted as mentoring or as education hours but cannot be counted for both. In addition, the applicant will be asked to briefly describe the mentoring they received.

## 5. Neonatal Therapy National Certification Examination

Once numbers 1-4 above have been met, the applicant is eligible to take the examination. A passing score must be achieved on the Neonatal Therapy National Certification Examination administered by the NTNCB. See Neonatal Therapy Certification Examination for more details.

### **Fellowships and Internships:**

The NTNCB acknowledges the importance of fellowships and internships in providing hands-on experiences to clinicians gaining skills in the NICU. However, the NTNCB differentiates hours that can and cannot be counted toward the NICU practice hour requirement as follows: Hours spent in a fellowship or internship that were achieved after a person becomes a credentialed professional will count toward the practice hour requirement. This includes PT NICU Fellowship, SLP Clinical Fellowship Year, and/or OT internships that may occur after graduation and taking board exams. Hours spent in internships, fellowships, or apprenticeships prior to graduation and taking board exams cannot be counted toward the practice hour requirement.

### **Legal Statement Regarding Certification:**

- Neonatal therapy certification is a specialty certification that demonstrates that an occupational therapist, physical therapist, or speech-language pathologist has met the minimum standard of education, experience and knowledge in the neonatal intensive care setting.
- Certification by the NTNCB does not in itself confer authority to practice therapy beyond the authority granted by a state or country that issues permissions to practice.
- The certified neonatal therapist designation must not be interpreted to mean that the NTNCB supersedes any state or country with regard to licensing requirements or permissions to treat patients. Therapists who have successfully become certified by the NTNCB must be aware of any and all stipulations within their practice and must not practice outside their legal limits. The NTNCB will not be held accountable for the provision of unsafe and/or unprofessional practice. It is the sole responsibility of the therapist and his/her licensing board or employer to provide oversight for breaches in appropriate practice.
- The applicant for CNT shall electronically sign the following statement as part of their application:  
Applicant Attestation Statement:
  - \* I attest that all statements made by me and information provided in this application are true and factual, to the best of my knowledge. I give permission to the NTNCB to contact individuals, companies, organizations, or hospitals documented on this application in order to validate the information provided. I understand that any false statements or deception in submitting this application may result in certification being denied or revoked, even in the event that falsified information is discovered after certification has been awarded.
  - \* I understand that neonatal therapy certification is contingent upon maintenance of a professional license, registration or credential (whichever is required documentation to practice in my locale) in good standing.

\* I have also read, understand, and agree to all rules and conditions of the neonatal therapy certification program as explained on the website, <https://www.ntncb.com>.

\*I understand that my personal data submitted as part of this application becomes the property of the NTNCB and may be stored as long as I am a CNT. The NTNCB will not share any applicant data with any other organizations without the explicit permission of the applicant.

\*NTNCB retains the right to verify CNT status of applicants with outside agencies.

\*I understand that my personal data submitted as part of this application, along with testing scores, may be used to track candidate success, to run psychometric analyses of the exam, to report on characteristics of CNTs, or to improve the process of certification. All data used for analyses will be stripped of applicant identifiers, and confidentiality will be maintained.

- \*I confirm that I have reviewed all information contained in this application prior to submission to ensure its accuracy. By checking below, I also acknowledge that it is my responsibility to provide updates to my contact information. Accurate contact information is necessary to ensure the timeliness of the certification process and communications relative to certification.

### **Section 3: Certification Process**

#### **Portfolio Submission:**

Applicants will submit a portfolio on an online platform at [www.ntncb.com](http://www.ntncb.com). This can be completed bi-annually between March 15th to May 15th and from September 15th to November 15th. The cost of the application is \$200, and payment is due at the time of application submission, with due dates of May 15th or November 15th. This fee ensures appropriate technical and office support during the application process and the convenience of a website that enables the online submission process, careful review and determination of eligibility, as well as notification of status.

#### **Application Review:**

Applications will be reviewed first by a member of the NTNCB support staff, and the candidate will be notified of any missing information (with 90 days given to submit additional documentation). Licensure is verified through the credentialing body on all applicants during the initial review process. Once all parts of the application have been received and approved by the support staff person, it is escalated to an 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. All support staff who review applications are trained, based on the auditing and review process.

If the application is denied, there will be a one-time re-application process allowed after the applicant completes all the certification application requirements, with a reduced fee of \$100.

#### **Notification of Eligibility to Take the Neonatal Therapy Certification Examination:**

Notification of eligibility to sit for the exam will be made within 90 days of submission of the fully completed certification application. The applicant must then sit for the exam within the next 6 months.

#### **Exam Administration:**

Exam administration will occur on an online platform at a designated test center (PSI/AMP) with scheduling availability throughout the year, which will allow participants to choose the examination time and location. Any necessary accommodations are coordinated through the testing center by completing a special accommodations form.

Each exam consists of 100 questions comprising questions related to NANT's Neonatal Therapy Core Scope of Practice. Time for testing is limited to 2 hours. Ninety questions are scored questions that have undergone a process of assessment that have deemed them suitable for the test. Ten questions are pilot test questions. Data from those questions are not figured in the final score, but the data helps the NTNCB know if further revisions are needed before it enters into a pool of test questions for future use.

PSI/AMP was selected as the test administration company in April of 2016 due to their positive participant reviews (98% approval rating). PSI/AMP has been providing testing services since 2000 and has more than 200 centers in the United States plus 100 international sites in 18 countries. PSI/AMP offers testing in all 50 states and 370 metro areas. They are the test administrator for Certified Hand Therapy, a similar certification for PTs and OTs. See the NTNCB exam manual for more details.

<https://www.ntncb.com/certification-exam-manual/> The exam manual also identifies how candidates can receive testing accommodations.

### **Resources for Exam Preparation:**

There is an interactive, online self-assessment and study guide on the website to identify areas of challenges available online:

<https://www.ntncb.com/certifications/neonatal-therapy-certification-study-guide-and-self-assessment/>.

Once the application is initiated, a reference list of articles and books is provided to enable studying for exam. The references are broken down into the areas that are on the self-assessment, so that applicants can focus their study where they need. There are sample examination questions available in the study guide along with examination preparation tips. Once the application fee is paid, additional practice questions are provided in the applicant portal.

### **Notification of Exam Results:**

Notification of a passing or failing score occurs onsite at the testing center, immediately following completion of the exam (instituted 11/7/17 after 6 months of psychometric testing and having the NTNCB notify candidates within one month of testing). Candidates are provided with scores including raw total score and category-based performance. Candidates who have not achieved a passing score can use category-based feedback to enable them to focus on areas that need improvement.

### **Examination Score Cut-Off:**

The current cut-score for passing or failing the neonatal therapy certification exam is 72/90. Scores at or above 80.0% (72/90) are considered passing, and scores below 80.0% (<72/90) are considered failing.

### **Testing Retakes in the Event of Exam Failure:**

Following the first test, the applicant is given feedback on areas in which he or she did not do well. The applicant who has failed the exam one time is offered one retake within one year (at a reduced exam fee of \$250). If the applicant fails the exam a second time, he or she is required to wait a minimum of one year prior to reapplying, in order to gain more experience and knowledge. The entire application and testing process then must be re-completed.

### **Certification Timeline:**

Applications are open between March 15th and May 15th with the deadline of May 15th, as well as September 15th and November 15th with the deadline of November 15th. The application fee is due at the time of submission. Once submitted, the application is reviewed and eligibility to take the exam determined within 90 days. Once notified of eligibility to take the exam, applicants must pay for, schedule and take the examination within 6 months of notification.

The certificate will be signed by one Board member who represents each discipline for a total of three signatures.

**Appeals Procedures:**

Following application, one of the following determinations with regard to an applicant’s application are made: approval, request for additional information, or rejection on the grounds that the applicant does not meet the certification eligibility requirements or has falsified documents submitted to the NTNCB.

The applicant who has an application rejected may appeal the NTNCB’s decision. Appeals must be made in writing with 30 days and include reasoning for disagreement with the decision. Appeals including all submitted documentation will be reviewed at the next full NTNC board meeting where a final determination will be made. The applicant may opt to join the board meeting in an online format in order to present their case, with a 10-minute time limitation. After conclusion of the meeting, the NTNCB will notify the applicant of the Board’s decision in writing within 30 days. This decision on the applicant’s status will be final. The applicant may apply again for neonatal therapy certification when they have met the criteria for experience, education, and mentoring.

The applicant who receives an unsatisfactory or non-passing score on the Neonatal Therapy National Certification Board examination has the right to request hand scoring of the exam. This request must be made in writing to the NTNCB within two weeks of receiving their examination score. The NTNCB will notify the candidate of the outcome within 60 days of this request. Due to the confidential nature of the exam, scores and content areas that were challenging will be shared with the candidate but specific content of the exam will not.

**Recertification:**

Recertification will be required every 5 years. Only those who maintain professional credentialing (licensure, registration, etc.), based on the requirements in the location in which they practice, will be eligible for recertification.

It is expected that applicants for recertification will continue to gain experience and knowledge in neonatal therapy over the five-year period in order to establish continued competency, based on what advancements have occurred in the field.

- **Requirements for recertification:**

- Maintenance of professional credentialing
- Completion of a minimum of 2000 hours of NICU-related practice, which can include any of the below:
  - Direct patient care in the NICU
  - Teaching or clinical instruction
  - Mentoring therapists
  - Professional presentations (i.e. teaching to residents or nurses, conference presentations)
  - Research; quality improvement; and/or publication
  - NICU program development
  - Leadership/boards/advisory teams related to the NICU
  - Developing /training/testing new products for NICU infants, families and/or neonatal therapists
- 60 hours of continuing education related to NICU clinical practice

- Examination is not required for recertification for those who have met the recertification requirements

- Therapists who do not meet with requirements of a minimum of 2000 hours of NICU services and 60 hours of education would retake the certification exam.
- A recertification fee, which is currently \$200, will be required at the time of recertification. The same fee will apply to all methods of becoming recertified (exam or by experience and education).
- Current CNTs can access the portal and track their recertification activities [here](#) .

**Total Costs to the Certification Applicant:**

The initial cost of submitting an application is \$200. Once approved by the Board as having met the eligibility requirements, the applicant can take the Neonatal Therapy Certification Examination. The Examination costs \$400. This amounts to a total cost of \$600 for initial certification. Recertification will occur every 5 years and the cost will be equivalent to the cost of application submission at that time (currently \$200).

**Certified Neonatal Therapist Designation :**

All therapists completing the requirements of neonatal therapy certification receive the designation of Certified Neonatal Therapist (CNT), for a 5-year period. The initials 'CNT' can then follow the name and credentials of the certified neonatal therapist.

**CNT Identifier:**

Each applicant for neonatal therapy certification receives a unique CNT number. It consists of the letters 'CNT', followed by the 2-digit year that the applicant was approved to take the exam, followed by the 3-digit number indicating what number applicant they are in that year; e.g. CNT17001, CNT17002, etc.

**Extenuating Circumstances:**

Extenuating circumstances, such a personal illness or unforeseen family responsibility, may require a deadline extension for an applicant. This extension can be applied to either the time necessary to complete an application, and/or an extension of an exam time frame. The applicant will be required to bring his/her situation to the attention of the Board in a timely manner. The Board will review each situation on a case by case basis at the next full Board meeting and determine if an extension is granted. The applicant liaison or support staff will then be responsible for communication with the applicant.