

All About the Certification Exams

CHAPTER

2



OBJECTIVES/TOPICS TO COVER:

- ✓ Know the steps to take before registering for the certification exam.
- ✓ Be familiar with the design of the certification exam.
- ✓ Evaluate the information to decide which certification exam is best for you.

THE CERTIFICATION EXAMS

Pharmacy technician certification distinguishes you as a professional in your field. The number of certified technicians has grown from a few years ago at an astonishing rate, which shows that the pathway to medication safety is developing.

Two different entities provide a National Certification Exam for pharmacy technicians: (1) the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board (PTCB) administers the Pharmacy Technician Certification Exam (PTCE) and (2) the Institute for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians (ICPT) administers the Exam for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians (ExCPT). Before arranging to take the certification exam, it is imperative to check with your State Board of Pharmacy to make sure the state you practice in approves of the PTCE, the ExCPT, or both.

Which Exam Should I Take: PTCE or ExCPT?

The first step is to check with your State Board of Pharmacy to see which exam is approved by your state.

The following states recognize *only* PTCE for certifying pharmacy technicians:

Arizona Louisiana Texas Wyoming

All other states recognize both PTCB and ExCPT for certification of practicing pharmacy technicians.

These listings were current as of November 2010. Pharmacy rules and regulations periodically change. Before registering for your certification exam, please be sure to check with your State Board of Pharmacy for current guidelines on which pharmacy technician certification exam is accepted.

ICPT = ExCPT (the Institute for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians, which is part of NHA (National Healthcareer Association), administers the Exam for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians)

PTCB = PTCE (the Pharmacy Technician Certification Board administers the Pharmacy Technician Certification Exam)

Next, look at the similarities and differences in the tests offered by PTCEB and ICPT.

How Are the Exams the Same?

Both exams are computer-based. PTCE moved from pencil and paper testing to computer-based testing in 2007. Computer-based testing allowed for quicker test results than the pencil and paper method. It also granted the flexibility to allow more testing days each year.

Computer-based testing means that the test taker will go to a specified site to take the exam on a computer. The exams cannot be taken at home on a personal computer. Test takers travel to a specified location to take the exam. The test taker is monitored by security cameras and by on-site administrators. The testing location is selected when you register for your exam. Again, the exam cannot be taken on a personal computer. You will register for the exam and select the most convenient testing location for you to travel to for the examination.

Both exams are timed. You have two hours to complete the exam.

Both exams have only multiple-choice questions. ExCPT has 110 questions. PTCE has 90 questions: no true/false, no essays, no matching. The exam you take will consist of only multiple-choice questions. While the ExCPT exam has 110 questions, 100 questions are scored or graded, and the other 10 questions are surveyed for possible use on future exams. This holds true for 80 of the 90 questions on the PTCE.

There is a fee for each exam. The fee for ExCPT is \$105. PTCE is \$129. Registration and payment for the PTCE exam are offered online only. The ExCPT exam registration and payment can be done over the phone or mailed in.

How Is the Exam Scored or Graded?

Both ExCPT and PTCE use a scaled score, which means that the number of questions answered correctly is mathematically converted (scored) and then applied to a pass or fail scale. It's difficult to determine how many questions can be missed to still pass the exam, because not all of the questions have an equal weighting. A question deemed more important in subject matter will have a higher point value than another question.

The passing score on the PTCE is 650. The maximum score is 900, while the lowest score is 300. You will achieve at least a 300 on the PTCE, but it takes a score of 650 or better to pass the exam!

The passing score for the ExCPT is 390, and scores may range from 200 to 500.

When Will I Know If I Passed?

Both PTCE and ExCPT have official pass/fail results available at the exam site as soon as the exam is completed. The pass/fail result will appear on the computer screen and will be printed out for you to have as a record of your results. Certificates and scaled scores will be mailed out within a few weeks of the testing date.

Exam retakes. The ExCPT exam may be taken as many times as necessary to pass. The PTCE may be retaken a maximum of three times. A fee is required for each exam session. PTCEB mandates a longer waiting period between retests than ICPT.

Each exam has similar pass rate. As of October 2010, ExCPT had a 72% pass rate. PTCE showed a pass rate of 72% for 2009. (The 2010 pass/fail figures for PTCE were not updated at the time of this printing.)

TESTING GOALS

ICPT and PTCEB have similar missions and goals. Among their goals are to enable pharmacy technicians to work more effectively with pharmacists to offer safe and effective patient care and service. A part of their collective vision is to show that certification will recognize pharmacy technicians who

are proficient in the knowledge and skills needed to assist pharmacists and to promote high standards of practice for pharmacy technicians.

How Are the Exams Different?

The main difference in the actual exam is the content that the questions focus on. More than half of the ExCPT exam (52%) focuses on the *dispensing process*. The *dispensing process* includes gathering prescription information, preparing and dispensing the prescription, calculations involved in dispensing, business math, aseptic technique, unit dosing, and repackaging. Questions in this category will also cover refill requirements, use of abbreviations, automated dispensing equipment, proper labeling requirements, and proper packaging and storing of medications. The calculation questions in the dispensing process category will involve conversion between units of measure, days supply, and IV drip rates. The business math will focus on markup, pricing, and inventory control. Aseptic technique questions will deal with proper handling of chemotherapy medications, parenteral routes of administration, the use of laminar airflow hoods, and aseptic practices and procedures while compounding.

Although 52% of the ExCPT exam covers the dispensing process, most questions on the PTCEB exam fall in the category of *Assisting the Pharmacist in Serving Patients* (66%). Exam questions in this category encompass receiving and processing a medication order, data relating to restricted and investigational drugs, third-party payers, calculations, preparing chemotherapy medications, extemporaneous compounding, storage requirements, record keeping, calibrating equipment, and aseptic technique.

Twenty-five percent of the ExCPT exam is made up of questions that address pharmacy regulations and technician duties. These questions involve labeling of over-the-counter and prescription medications, controlled substance laws and procedures, inventory control, and federal law.

The remaining 23% of the ExCPT exam involves *Drugs and Drug Therapy*. Questions on this topic involve drug classification, brand/generic names, most frequently prescribed drugs, dosage forms, mechanism of action for the drug, and common adverse interactions.

Maintaining Medications and Inventory Control Systems makes up 22% of the content on the PTCEB exam. The questions in this category cover home medical equipment (durable medical equipment), stock and inventory, medication disposal, controlled substance and investigation, drug record keeping, repackaging, and quality assurance.

Participating in the Administration and Management of Pharmacy Practice makes up the final 12% of the PTCE. Questions in this category cover HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act), pharmacy policies and procedures, and compliance regulations.

Table 2-1 summarizes exam categories and content. A detailed listing is outlined in Appendix A.

APPLICATION PROCESS

Just as there are similarities and differences in the exam, there are similarities and differences in applying for the exams. You may choose one exam over the other because of eligibility requirements, application processes, or both. Please read the application process for each exam. Which exam is best for you?

Table 2-1 Exam Content

ExCPT Exam Content	PTCE Exam Content
Dispensing Process 52% of the exam	Assisting the Pharmacist in Serving Patients 66% of the exam
Regulations and Technician Duties 25% of the exam	Maintaining Medication and Inventory Control Systems 22% of the exam
Drugs and Drug Therapy 23% of the exam	Participating in the Administration and Management of Pharmacy Practice 12% of the exam

Am I Eligible to Take the Exam?

To be eligible to take either certification exam, the following criteria may be required:

1. The candidate must be at least 18 years of age.
2. The candidate must have a high school diploma or GED.
3. The candidate must have no felony convictions.
4. The candidate must not have had any license or registration revoked or suspended or any disciplinary actions by a regulatory agency such as a State Health Board or State Board of Pharmacy.

The eligibility requirements for the exams differ somewhat regarding drug-related and felony convictions. If this is an area of concern for you, please read eligibility requirements on the exams' websites. There may be exceptions to the eligibility requirement regarding no felony convictions. Both examination bodies ask that testing candidates write an appeal for consideration if there is a felony conviction on their record. Reading the detailed information on the website will help you make your decision on which exam will work better for you.

PTCE website: <http://www.ptcb.org>

ExCPT website: <http://www.nhanow.com/pharmacy-technician.aspx>

After you determine your eligibility to take the exam, you are ready to apply. The application process is administered a bit differently for each exam.

PTCE Application Process

An online application process is required for the PTCE. Follow the links on the website to apply for the exam. This is a relatively easy process. You will begin by creating an account. It's important for you to use a dependable e-mail address as this is what the PTCB will use to send you the ticket to the test or Authorization to Test (ATT) letter. It's also a good idea to jot down your newly created account password. The password is needed to access account information.

You will need a credit card or an electronic check to pay for the exam at the time of the application.

After the application has been completed and the payment has been received, PTCB will e-mail you, the candidate, an ATT letter. This letter may take a few weeks to arrive, but it's an important document. It will have the instructions on how to schedule your exam and the dates on which you can take your exam. Please respond to your ATT letter right away, because PTCB allows you a limited amount of time to schedule your exam date. Keep your ATT letter in a safe place. This letter is your "ticket" to get into the testing room. You must bring your ATT letter to the testing site on the day of your exam!

Complete your application with the exact name that appears on your government-issued picture ID. You will present your government-issued picture ID and your ATT letter at the test site. The names on these two documents must match.

The ATT letter sent to you from PTCB indicates that you are eligible to take the exam. Your next step is to register for your testing date. Please be sure to register for your test date as soon as you receive your ATT letter. PTCB has a 90-day cutoff date from the time you apply for the exam until the time you test.

You may register for your exam date by e-mail or by phone. Your ATT letter will have the e-mail address and phone number to register. You can also find this contact information on the PTCB website. Note that you will be contacting Pearson Vue to schedule your appointment, not PTCB. Pearson Vue is the company that administers the certification exam for PTCB.

ExCPT Application Process

The application process for ExCPT has fewer steps than that of the PTCE. Applicants simply call a toll-free phone number to apply and to schedule a test date. Basic information will be given over the phone when applying for the ExCPT. You will be calling LaserGrade Testing Centers, which is

the company that administers the certification exam for ICPT. LaserGrade will help you find the closest and most convenient testing center. Payment for the exam is made at this time by credit card or you may mail in a personal check or money order. One benefit of the ExCPT application process is that candidates can usually take their exam within 24 to 48 hours of registration.

During the application process, alert exam officials to any special needs you may have. Both Pearson Vue and LaserGrade Testing will make special accommodations for candidates who qualify under the American with Disabilities Act.

Important: Be sure your government-issued picture ID matches the name you gave when registering for your exam.

Apply for ExCPT: LaserGrade toll-free number 1-800-211-2754

Register for PTCE: PearsonVue toll-free number 1-866-902-0593 or www.pearsonvue.com/ptcb

Can I Change or Cancel My Exam Appointment?

Sometimes candidates get nervous when their test date approaches, and they may decide to move their testing date to a future time. You should make every effort to keep your testing appointment time. However, an emergency may come up that makes it difficult for you to test on the date you selected. Both PTCE and ICPT allow candidates to cancel or to reschedule their exam appointments. Rescheduling must be done at least 24 hours before the testing appointment time to avoid additional fees. If you choose to cancel your appointment, PTCE will allow you to withdraw your application and a full refund will be issued as long as you cancel at least 24 hours before your scheduled appointment time. ICPT will credit your account, and the credit can be used for a future testing date. Detailed rules on rescheduling or canceling your appointment can be found on the exams' websites.

Once you make your appointment, be on time and don't miss your appointment! If you have car trouble or some other problem that prevents you from being on time—go to your appointment late! You will not get a refund if you miss your appointment time. At best, you will arrive late but still be allowed to test and finish on time! No matter what, go to your exam. You may not have enough time to finish the exam, but at least you will have the testing experience and know what to expect the next time you take the exam.

GETTING READY FOR TEST DAY

Make sure you take a computer-based testing tutorial on your home computer before test day. The tutorial shows you how to navigate through the exam, what keyboard keys to use, what the exam screens will look like, how to skip a question, how to go back to a question, how to review your exam questions, and how to use the on-screen calculator. Do this tutorial at home to help relieve anxiety you may have about how computer-based tests work. If you do this tutorial at home, on your testing day all you will have to concentrate on is the actual exam.

The tutorial for the ExCPT is found at www.psiexams.com

The tutorial for the PTCE is found at www.vue.com/ptcb/

TEST DAY

You have gone through all the steps to determine which test is better for you, determined your eligibility, and applied and registered for your testing date. Now you're ready for the big day!

Studies show that we test better in a familiar surrounding. I recommend that you drive to your testing site before your exam date. Go inside the building, and if you're able to, sit in the room that you'll be testing in. Taking the time for these recommendations will help you gauge the drive time to the testing site. It will help calm your nerves on test day, because you'll be more familiar with where you're going and what your testing environment will be like.

On your actual test day, wear comfortable clothing. You should arrive at your test site at least 20 minutes before your appointment time. Take this time to get your thoughts organized and to use the restroom. Some sites may allow you to begin testing as soon as you arrive so that you may start the test earlier than your appointment time.

When checking in to your testing site, you will be required to show your government-issued picture ID. If you're taking the PTCE, you must also have your ATT letter. Your name on your ATT letter must match your name on your ID. If you're taking the ExCPT, your name on your ID must be the same name given when you registered for your exam over the phone.

You will not be allowed to take any personal belongings into the testing room. I suggest that you go into your testing site empty handed. Depending on the season, you may want to wear a lightweight jacket in case the testing room is chilly. If you have a purse, heavy coat, cell phone, book, or any other personal property, it will have to be stored with the receptionist before going into the testing room.

Do not bring your calculator to the exam! You must use the calculators provided to you by the testing site. On-screen calculators are used, or PTCE offers the option of a handheld calculator. Scratch paper or a dry erase board will also be provided by the testing site. Two suggestions for you or things to watch: If you're issued a dry erase board, make sure your dry erase marker works! Secondly, I suggest you use the on-screen calculator, as the handheld calculators at the testing sites are sometimes unreliable. You will only be given two pieces of scratch paper, which should be sufficient and shouldn't be a problem for you.

You will *not* be able to ask any questions about the exam content. The testing site administrator is there to proctor, or to oversee, the exam, only. The proctor will not be able to answer any questions. Please don't waste any of your testing time trying to ask about or clarify exam content.

Your testing time starts as soon as you walk into the testing room and sit at your computer. There is a tutorial offered before the actual test begins. The tutorial shows you how to navigate through the computer-based testing. You will be able to see an on-screen countdown clock of the remaining time for your exam. I strongly suggest that you do the tutorial at home before your test date. The time you spend on the tutorial may be included in your two-hour time limit. Don't take too long with this tutorial!

Test Taking Tips

- ✓ Set a study schedule to be as prepared as you can be. You'll retain more information if you study in small amounts of time each day rather than "cramming" for the exam the night before. For example, study for 45 minutes and then take a break. Study five times a week for a few weeks before the exam.
- ✓ Take practice tests. Follow-up on missed questions for understanding.
- ✓ Get a study buddy to help you prepare for the exam.
- ✓ Visit the exam site before the day of the test.
- ✓ Don't cram for the exam the night before or the morning of your exam. You're probably not going to learn anything new the morning of the exam. Cramming will only cause you to be more nervous and unsure.
- ✓ Be well rested and alert on test day.
- ✓ Dress comfortably.
- ✓ Read each question carefully. Don't spend too much time on a question. If you're unsure, mark the question to come back to later.
- ✓ If you don't know the answer, eliminate the answers that you know are wrong.
- ✓ Watch the clock and keep track of your time.
- ✓ Never leave a question unanswered.
- ✓ If you are unsure about the correct answer, pick the longer answer choice.
- ✓ Absolutes such as *never*, *always*, and *must* are probably *not* going to be the correct answer.

MORE ABOUT THE EXAM

The exam questions for both PTCE and ExCPT are written by registered pharmacists, certified pharmacy technicians, and pharmacy technician educators. Testing candidates will have a unique test,

but each tester will have the same subject matter. The questions encompass knowledge from a variety of work settings. The exam is not specific to one pharmacy setting. Rather, your exam will likely have questions regarding hospital pharmacy, IV compounding, and retail pharmacy. Your exam will most likely have a mix of questions on brand/generic medications, pharmacy calculations, abbreviations, and protocols, for example. You will have to be knowledgeable in all settings to be successful on your exam.

The ExCPT exam is designed for entry-level pharmacy technicians. If you are one of those individuals with many years of practical pharmacy technician experience, the Institute for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians (ICPT) believes that you deserve to test well! The intent of the ExCPT is *not* to include exam questions to stump the smartest of the smart. The intent *is* to provide a baseline of knowledge for entry-level pharmacy technicians.

Remember, the certification of pharmacy technicians is nationally recognized. What this means is that when you pass the exam, you are then recognized as certified in all states. You don't have to take a new exam if you move to another state. This compares to pharmacists who are mandated to take a state-specific exam for the state that they practice pharmacy in. ICPT and PTCB are recognized in the United States as the authorities in certifying pharmacy technicians.

Some entities may require the certified technician to take an additional test before practicing at that site. For instance, a hospital pharmacy may require the certified technician to take a specific exam on IV Compounding/Aseptic Technique. One of the benefits of the pharmacy technician certification is that it's nationally recognized rather than state specific.

Upon successful completion of the certification exam, you will have the credentialing of CPhT after your name.

STEPS TO BECOMING A CPhT

- ✓ Step 1: Check with your State Board of Pharmacy to determine which exam is approved by your state.
- ✓ Step 2: Look at the similarities and differences in the two exams to determine which certification exam is best for you.
- ✓ Step 3: Make sure you meet the eligibility requirements to take the exam.
- ✓ Step 4: Apply for the exam.
- ✓ Step 5: Choose a testing site and register for a testing date.
- ✓ Step 6: Take the online computer-based testing tutorial at your home computer.
- ✓ Step 7: Prepare for your exam.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Institute for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians (ICPT)/National Healthcareer Association (NHA)
Exam for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians (ExCPT)
7500 West 160th Street
Stilwell, Kansas 66085
Phone: 800-499-9092
Fax: 913-661-6291
<http://www.icpt.org>
info@nhanow.com

Pharmacy Technician Certification Board (PTCB)
Pharmacy Technician Certification Exam (PTCE)
2215 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20037-2985
Phone: 800-363-8012
Fax: 202-429-7596
<http://www.ptcb.org>

Exhibit 2-1 Study Tips from a Certified Tech



Emma Wickland, CPhT, BS

*Story County Hospital
Nevada, Iowa*

I said all through high school, "I'll just do it later." Yes, I had a pretty bad case of the studying blues until I was introduced to these techniques in a freshman orientation class.

- Study with a buddy or in a small group! Surrounding yourself with positive thinkers and peers that are dealing with the same obstacles as you will have a good impact on your grades and information retention. I believe the best way to know you understand the material is to be able to explain it to others.
- Note cards work wonders! When studying vocabulary or math conversions, or even studying what certain medications are prescribed for, simply reading through a list won't be enough. I suggest challenging yourself (and friends) to a game of flash cards. It sounds juvenile, but how fast did you learn addition using flash cards?
- An alternative to using note cards is sticky notes. I am partial to sticky notes, mostly because they are so colorful, which makes it more interesting for me.
- Use the teachers and professionals around you to learn all of the real-life knowledge you can. If you don't fully understand something you are reading about, or are interested to learn more, who better to ask for help than the people who deal with those things every day? These healthcare professionals and teachers have been there and done that when it comes to the classes you are taking and intelligence you are after. Not to mention that the 6-plus years of schooling they endured usually means they are passionate about their work and will be more than willing to light that spark in you.

Exhibit 2-2 Study Tips from a Certified Tech



Megan Irlmeier, CPhT, BS-Biology

*UNMC Pharmacy Student
Bellevue Medical Center
Bellevue, Nebraska*

To prepare for the CPhT exam, I started by looking through the glossary and starting sections that were unfamiliar to me. Since I have worked in the field of pharmacy, I was also able to cross out some sections that I felt I didn't need to study. This allowed me to focus on newer and unfamiliar subjects more than if I were to go through the entire book.

Being unfamiliar with IV preparations and calculations, I started there. It is important to know conversions in this area. Second, if you think about it, the pharmacy field has its own "language." I feel that being knowledgeable about the abbreviations used in pharmacy is a crucial step in understanding many questions. If you don't know what is being asked on the exam because you don't know what an abbreviation stands for, how are you going to be able to answer the question? Along the same lines, knowing the top generics and their brand name is important in being able to answer questions as well.

When taking the certification exam, I felt it was beneficial to go through the introduction, because I had not taken a computer-based exam before. This portion of the test was not timed, and the program showed me how to use the calculator, how to flag questions to go back to, and how to see if there were any unanswered questions. I was also able to calm my nerves a bit during the tutorial. On that note, knowing how to flag questions is useful when you are unable to figure out a question. Since the exam was timed, I found it best to answer the questions I knew and save the harder questions for the end by flagging them. This allows you to manage your time for the questions that may require more time. Before submitting the exam, make sure all the questions have been answered. Last, but not least, if you are someone that gets anxious when others are "waiting to see" how you do on the exam, don't tell anyone you are taking it. Surprise them after the exam when you find out you have passed, because you will!

RESOURCES

1. Institute for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians. *ExCPT Candidate's Guide: Exam for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians*. Available at: register.nhanow.com/pics/.../ExCPT%20Candidate%20Handbook.pdf. Accessed February 2011.
2. National Healthcareer Association: Institute for the Certification of Pharmacy Technicians. Pharmacy Technician Certification (CPhT). Available at: <http://www.nhanow.com/pharmacy-technician.aspx>. Accessed February 2011.
3. Pharmacy Technician Certification Board Website. <http://www.ptcb.org>. Accessed February 2011.

TASK SHEET

TOPIC TO REVIEW: PROCESSING PRESCRIPTION ORDERS

Materials

Pharmacy Technician Exam Review Guide
JB Test Prep: Pharmacy Technician Exam Review Guide

To Do List

- Get a study buddy
- Read chapter
- Complete test
- Review missed questions

Prepare

1. Read the section on processing orders.
2. Take practice test at the end of the chapter.

Study Plan

Make your own study plan for this chapter. Write down pages you will read and the practice test you'll take by the end of the week.

1. Read pages _____ on _____ (date).
2. Take end of chapter practice test on _____ (date).

Tips

Get a study buddy! If math is your weakness but your coworker's or classmate's strong point, team up with them to help you prepare for your exam. If you are most familiar with retail pharmacy procedures, for instance, team up with a pharm tech who is accustomed to IV pharmacy. Becoming study buddies will help you learn from each other's strong points. Your IV study buddy will help you learn commonly prescribed parenteral medications, while you, the retail expert, will share your expertise in insurance billing.

End of Chapter

List what you need to review.