Nurses who care for patients with wounds, ostomies and incontinence are not created equal. Only wound, ostomy and continence (WOC) nurse specialists have completed dedicated WOC education—beyond basic nursing education—with hands-on clinical training and have become certified by the Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nursing Certification Board (WOCNCB®). These nurses provide the compassionate care that garners praise from patients and the results that research proves: patients in agencies with WOC nurses, compared to those without WOC nurses, had significantly better outcomes (Westra et al., 2013).

WOC nursing is one of the few specialties recognized by the American Nurses Association (ANA). ANA’s recognition of the scope and standards of practice for WOC nursing as a specialty signifies that WOC nursing adheres to the high standards cultivated by the ANA (WOCN® Society, 2010).

"When I had a colostomy earlier this year, I was emotionally devastated and physically inept at changing the pouch. I don't know what I ever would have done without the expert care and compassion of the very competent WOC nurse."

WOC nurses play a pivotal role in providing optimal patient care in multiple health care settings including inpatient, outpatient, long-term care and home health. Each WOC nurse serves as an educator, consultant, researcher and administrator (WOCN Society-WOCNCB, 2008).

Choose a WOC Nurse

WOC nurses can be educated and certified, and practice in one or more area of wound, ostomy or continence nursing. Both the WOCN Society and the WOCNCB websites allow you to search for a WOC nurse in your area. This directory allows searching of over 2,100 WOCN Society members who have elected to be listed in the nurse referral database; however, membership in the WOCN Society does not guarantee certification. To confirm certification and verify credentials, contact the WOCNCB (www.wocncb.org).

What are the credentials?

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- CWOCN® Certified Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nurse
- CWCN® Certified Wound Care Nurse
- COCN® Certified Ostomy Care Nurse
- CCCN® Certified Continence Care Nurse
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- CWOCN-AP® Certified Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nurse – Advanced Practice
- CWON-AP® Certified Wound, Ostomy Nurse – Advanced Practice
- CWCN-AP® Certified Wound Care Nurse – Advanced Practice
- COCN-AP® Certified Ostomy Nurse – Advanced Practice
- CCCN-AP® Certified Continence Care Nurse – Advanced Practice
- CFCN® Certified Foot Care Nurse

Numerous wound credentials are currently available with varying requirements. For more information about differences in wound care credentialing programs, please refer to the website for a comparison of wound care certification programs (http://www.wocncb.org/ become-certified/how_to_choose.pdf).

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PATHWAYS TO BECOMING A CERTIFIED WOC NURSE

The educational pathway to becoming a WOC nurse includes options along the way to fit the lifestyle and experience of a nurse. The traditional route includes one of seven Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nursing Education Programs (WOCNEPs), which have been successfully educating nurses and preparing them to care for patients with wounds, ostomies and incontinence issues since the 1960s. Only WOCN-accredited WOCNEPs provide an organized specialty education course for nurses in all three areas. WOCNEPs are also unique because beyond an extensive didactic portion, they also include clinical work that all applicants must complete.

An alternate experiential route can also be taken whereby a nurse completes 50 contact hours (CEs or equivalent college work) in each desired specialty (wound, ostomy, continence or a combination thereof) in the last five years, plus 1,500 clinical experience hours during the last five years in each specialty (375 hours of the 1,500 clinical experience hours should be completed within the year prior to the exam (WOCNCB, 2010)).

Certification
After a qualified applicant completes either education at an approved WOCNEP or the experiential requirements, it is important to schedule testing for the certification exam through the WOCNCB. To maintain current certification status, the nurse must then recertify every five years.

Wound Care
WOC nurses are experts at providing wound care. Wounds of all types are becoming increasingly problematic; for example, pressure ulcers are steadily increasing in prevalence. These costly, ongoing problems have attracted attention to the practice of wound care and the need for wound specialists who can meet the growing demand for effective preventive care and management.

As the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) transitions to value-based purchasing, the value of WOC nursing becomes apparent as facilities and agencies implement best practices to prevent and manage pressure ulcers and other acute and chronic wounds. This emphasis on preventive care is mandated across all care settings, including home health care, particularly as families increasingly care for aging relatives with functional declines (WOCN Society, 2010).

WOC nurses are experts in planning and providing the comprehensive preventive care necessary to reduce the frequency of these conditions. Research has shown that patients in agencies with WOC nurses who provided in-person consults or telehealth consults, compared to those without WOC nurses, were nearly twice as likely to have improvement in pressure ulcers and 20-40 percent more likely to have improvement in lower extremity and surgical wounds, respectively (Westra et al., 2013).
The Impact of a WOC Nurse
A recent study investigated how WOC nurses affect patient outcomes in home health care settings and found that patients in home health care agencies with a WOC nurse, compared to agencies without a WOC nurse, were:

Ostomy Care
WOC nurses provide superior ostomy care. Patients undergoing ostomy surgery, whether temporary or permanent, require intensive physical and emotional care, as well as continued support, to return to their normal lives. For patients across all settings with fecal and urinary diversions, fistulas and tubes, WOC nurses provide specialized care with the goals of maximizing independence in self-care and helping patients adapt to the life-altering changes in body image. Specialty care is provided throughout the continuum of care and may include stoma site selection, pre- and post-operative management and education, complex prosthetic fitting, product selection, treatment of peristomal skin complications, sexual counseling, dietary counseling and vocational counseling.

But care does not stop when a patient is discharged from the hospital. The need for specialty care continues well beyond the immediate post-surgical period. WOC nurses provide long-term support to patients with permanent ostomies through support groups and follow-up care (WOCN Society, 2010).

Continence Care
Caring for individuals with urinary and/or fecal incontinence is a billion-dollar industry (WOCN Society, 2010). The prevalence of incontinence is exemplified by the increase in advertising dollars spent promoting the products that treat the conditions. Urinary incontinence affects one out of 10 community-dwelling adults and one of three residents of long-term care facilities (WOCN Society, 2010). Fecal incontinence affects more than two percent of community-dwelling adults and 12 percent or more of extended-care patients (WOCN Society, 2010). We can only anticipate that the prevalence of continence issues and needs will continue to increase as our population ages.

WOC nurses specializing in continence care help manage patients with incontinence due to muscle or nerve dysfunction, congenital anomalies, infection, surgery, sphincter deficiencies and psychological disorders. Fortunately, many patients can be cured or will at least experience improvement in their incontinence with treatment.

“ As one who found himself facing health issues and life-altering changes that needed careful consideration, when I needed calm reassurance and knowledgeable and caring support, that support came in the form of two wonderful WOC nurses. Because of them, living with a stoma is as natural as my life was prior to my surgery.”
Bring a WOC Nurse to Your Facility
With experience comes wisdom and expertise. The vast amount of education and preparation required to become a WOC nurse enables each nurse to deliver and coordinate excellent skilled care.

There are distinct advantages to employing a WOC nurse who has met the rigorous requirements to complete a WOCNEP and obtain a WOCNCB certification. WOC nurses use expert clinical skills, facilitate cost containment, drive revenue and ensure regulatory compliance, in addition to improving patient care through advocacy, patient/family education, research and the achievement of positive clinical outcomes (WOCN Society, 2010). These achievements are accomplished through a variety of activities including:

- Developing a formulary for supply management.
- Developing protocols for cost-effective resource utilization.
- Preventing complications and reducing recidivism.
- Improving the continuity and coordination of care across settings.
- Increasing staff productivity.
- Facilitating reimbursement.
- Developing new revenue-producing programs.
- Enhancing patient satisfaction and loyalty.
- Advocating for supply and service reimbursement.
- Providing staff education and orientation.
- Developing policy and procedures and standards for documentation.
- Participating in research and/or utilizing evidence-based care.

"We profoundly appreciate the expertise and effort our WOC nurse extends to our patients. This is a much needed skill that many facilities lack."

NEARLY TWICE as likely to have improvement in pressure ulcers.
20% more likely to have improvement in lower extremity ulcers.
40% more likely to have improvement in surgical wounds.
40% more likely to have improvement in urinary incontinence.
14% more likely to have improvement in bowel incontinence.

(Westra et al., 2013)
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