

Introduction to Medical-Surgical Nursing

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Core concepts, roles, and foundational knowledge for the entry-level practitioner

1. Definition & Scope

Aspect	Description
Medical-Surgical Nursing (Med-Surg)	The specialty that provides comprehensive care for adult patients undergoing medical treatment, surgical procedures, or both.
Population Served	Adults (typically 18-65) and older adults with acute, chronic, or post-operative conditions.
Settings	Inpatient units (medical, surgical, step-down, telemetry), ambulatory surgery centers, ICU overflow, and some community clinics.
Core Goal	Promote recovery, prevent complications, and support optimal functional status through evidence-based nursing care.

2. Role of the Med-Surg Nurse

1. **Assessment** – Perform systematic physical exams, obtain histories, and interpret diagnostic data.
 2. **Planning** – Develop individualized care plans using nursing diagnoses (e.g., NANDA) and measurable outcomes.
 3. **Implementation** – Deliver interventions: medication administration, wound care, mobility assistance, patient education, and coordination of multidisciplinary services.
 4. **Evaluation** – Continuously reassess patient response, modify the plan, and document outcomes.
 5. **Advocacy & Communication** – Serve as the patient's voice, relay information to physicians, therapists, and families.
 6. **Leadership** – Mentor new staff, manage unit flow, and participate in quality-improvement projects.
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3. Common Patient Categories

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Category	Typical Conditions	Key Nursing Priorities
Medical	Diabetes, COPD, CHF, pneumonia, renal failure, sepsis	Fluid/electrolyte balance, infection control, medication titration, patient education
Surgical	Appendectomy, cholecystectomy, orthopedic repairs, abdominal surgeries	Pain management, incision monitoring, early ambulation, DVT prophylaxis
Postoperative	Postanesthesia care, ICU stepdown	Airway protection, hemodynamic stability, nausea/vomiting control
Complex/High risk	Oncology, transplant, bariatric surgery	Specialized monitoring, immunosuppression management, nutrition support

4. Fundamental Concepts

4.1 Pathophysiology Review

- **Homeostasis** – Understanding how disease disrupts fluid, electrolyte, temperature, and acid-base balance.
- **Inflammatory Response** – Recognize signs of infection vs. normal postsurgical inflammation.

4.2 Pharmacology Basics

Drug Class	Common Agents	Primary Indication	Major Nursing Considerations
Analgesics	Morphine, Hydromorphone	Pain control	Assess respiratory status, monitor for sedation
Antibiotics	Ceftriaxone, Piperacillin/tazobactam	Infection	Check allergies, renal dosing, culture results
Anticoagulants	Heparin, Enoxaparin	DVT prophylaxis	Monitor aPTT/anti-Xa, watch for bleeding
Cardiovascular	Lisinopril, Metoprolol	Hypertension/CHF	Observe BP, heart rate, orthostatic changes

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Drug Class	Common Agents	Primary Indication	Major Nursing Considerations
Insulins	Regular, Glargine	Diabetes	Check glucose q4-6h, watch for hypoglycemia

4.3 Perioperative Care Timeline

Phase Core Activities

Pre-op Verify