CPHN Certified in Public Health NURSING

Understanding CPHN Exam Questions

How to read, interpret, and answer
one-best-answer questions.



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Understanding CPHN Exam Questions

A Guide to Reading and Answering One-Best-Answer Questions

Preparing for the Certified in Public Health Nursing (CPHN) exam involves more than knowing the content. It also helps to understand **how exam questions are structured and what they are asking you to do.**

CPHN exam questions use a **one-best-answer multiple-choice format**. You will be presented with a question or scenario followed by response options and asked to select the **best answer**.

Sometimes the correct response will be immediately clear. Other times, more than one response may seem reasonable. In those situations, your task is not simply to identify an answer that *could* be correct. Your task is to identify the response that **best answers the specific question being asked.**

This guide will help you practice that skill.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

As you work through this guide, you'll learn how to:

- Identify exactly what a question is asking.
- Recognize words that can change the meaning of a question.
- Separate important information from details that do not affect your answer.
- Avoid adding assumptions or information that isn't provided.
- Compare reasonable response options and identify the best answer.
- Use a consistent approach when you encounter a challenging question.

The goal isn't to find tricks. It's to understand the question.

Read carefully, focus on the information provided, and answer the question that is actually being asked.

Anatomy of a CPHN Exam Question

CPHN exam questions use a **one-best-answer multiple-choice format**. Understanding the parts of a question can help you focus on the information provided and identify exactly what you are being asked to determine.

Example

> **Question:**
> A public health nurse has implemented a community-based diabetes prevention program among low-income neighborhoods. Program evaluation shows that participation remains low due to scheduling, transportation, and lack of childcare. **Which action can best address these factors?**
>
> **Answers:**
> **A.** Continue the program for the rest of the year to maintain program fidelity.
> **B.** Modify the program delivery by offering mobile clinics and extending the time.
> **C.** Increase the educational and marketing materials about diabetes to increase visibility of the program.

THE SCENARIO
A public health nurse has implemented a community-based diabetes prevention program among low-income neighborhoods. Program evaluation shows that participation remains low due to scheduling, transportation, and lack of childcare.

THE ASK
Which action can best address these factors?

THE RESPONSE OPTIONS
A. Continue the program for the rest of the year to maintain program fidelity
B. Modify the program delivery by offering mobile clinics and extending the time
C. Increase the educational and marketing materials about diabetes to increase visibility of the program

WHAT SHOULD YOU NOTICE?

The Scenario: What information have I been given?
The scenario provides the facts and context you need to answer the question. Focus on the information provided without adding details or assumptions of your own.

The Ask: What exactly am I being asked to determine?
Pay close attention to words that tell you what the question requires. In this example, best address these factors matters. The question is asking you to choose the response that best addresses the specific barriers described in the scenario.

The Response Options: Which option best answers the ask?
More than one response may describe an action that could be reasonable in a public health program. Consider each option in relation to the specific question being asked.

REMEMBER: THERE IS ONE BEST ANSWER

More than one response may sound reasonable or include something that could be appropriate in the situation. Instead of asking: **"Could this be correct?"** Ask: **"Does this best answer the question being asked?"**

A Simple Approach to Every Question

When you encounter a question on the CPHN exam, use the same four-step approach:

READ → IDENTIFY → DECIDE → CHECK

1. READ the entire question

Read the full scenario and question before looking for an answer. Pay attention to the information you have been given and resist the urge to fill in details that aren't there.

> *In our example:*
> A community-based diabetes prevention program has low participation. The scenario tells us why: **scheduling, transportation, and lack of childcare.** Those details matter.

2. IDENTIFY what the question is asking

Before considering the response options, make sure you know exactly what you are being asked to determine.

> *In our example:*
> The question asks which action would **best address these factors**. You aren't being asked how to improve the program generally. You're being asked to address the **specific barriers identified in the scenario**.

3. DECIDE what the answer should accomplish

Before choosing a response, think about what needs to happen based on the information provided.

> *In our example:*
> The best response should reduce the practical barriers that are making it difficult for people to participate in the program.

4. CHECK the response options

Now compare each option with what the question is asking.

A. Continue the program for the rest of the year to maintain program fidelity.
This does not address the barriers that are limiting participation.

B. Modify the program delivery by offering mobile clinics and extending the time.
Best answer. Modifying how and when the program is delivered directly addresses the access barriers described in the scenario.

C. Increase the educational and marketing materials about diabetes to increase visibility of the program.
Increasing awareness may be useful in some circumstances, but the scenario does not identify lack of awareness as the reason for low participation.

THE TAKEAWAY

Use the information in the scenario to guide your answer. An option may describe a reasonable public health nursing action and still not be the best answer to the question in front of you.

When you're deciding between responses, go back to the scenario and ask: **Which answer most directly addresses what the question tells me?**

Use the Information You Are Given

Your professional experience is valuable when answering CPHN exam questions. But experience can also make it tempting to interpret a situation based on what you have seen before.

Focus on **what the question actually tells you** rather than adding assumptions of your own.

Example Question

> **Question:**
> During a community outreach visit, a public health nurse notices a client avoids eye contact during the session. **What is the most culturally responsive action?**
>
> **Answers:**
> **A.** Continue the session as planned while avoiding eye contact.
> **B.** Recognize that eye contact norms vary across cultures.
> **C.** Interpret it as lack of engagement and modify approach.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

The public health nurse observes that the client **avoids eye contact**.
That's the behavior the question gives us. We are not given any information about why the client is avoiding eye contact.

WHAT DON'T WE KNOW?

We don't know what the client's behavior means. It would be an assumption to interpret the lack of eye contact as disengagement. The question asks for the **most culturally responsive action**, so the best response should recognize that behaviors such as eye contact may have different meanings across cultures.

DON'T TURN AN OBSERVATION INTO AN ASSUMPTION

Now compare the response options:

A. Continue the session as planned while avoiding eye contact.
This changes the nurse's behavior without first considering what the client's behavior may mean.

B. Recognize that eye contact norms vary across cultures.
Best answer. This recognizes that expectations around eye contact can differ and avoids assigning meaning to the client's behavior based on an assumption.

C. Interpret it as lack of engagement and modify approach.
This assumes the client's lack of eye contact indicates disengagement, even though the question provides no information to support that conclusion.

THE TAKEAWAY

Separate what you observe from what you assume the observation means.

When a question gives you a behavior or situation without explaining its meaning, don't add an explanation of your own. Use the information provided and choose the response that best answers the question being asked.

Look for the Best Answer

Sometimes more than one response may sound reasonable. The challenge is to identify the response that **best addresses the situation described in the question**.

Don't stop when you find an option that *could* help. Compare the options and ask which one most completely answers the question.

> **Question:**
> A public health nurse is developing a diabetes prevention workshop for a culturally-diverse community with low health literacy. During a pilot session, participants appear confused and ask repeated questions. **Which strategy is most effective to improve understanding?**
>
> **Answers:**
> **A.** Revise the materials to use plain language, culturally-relevant visuals, and teach-back methods.
> **B.** Provide more written materials for participants to review after the session.
> **C.** Extend the length of the session to allow more time for verbal explanations.

MORE THAN ONE ANSWER MAY SOUND REASONABLE

At first glance, each response offers a way to provide participants with additional information or support. But the question isn't simply asking what *could* help.

It asks which strategy is **most effective to improve understanding** for this particular audience.

Now compare the options:

A. Revise the materials to use plain language, culturally-relevant visuals, and teach-back methods.
Best answer. This response directly addresses the participants' low health literacy and observed confusion by adapting how information is communicated and checking for understanding.

B. Provide more written materials for participants to review after the session.
Additional materials may be useful, but providing more written information does not necessarily address the communication and comprehension barriers described in the scenario.

C. Extend the length of the session to allow more time for verbal explanations.
More time could allow for additional explanation, but it does not address whether the information is being communicated in a way participants can understand.

THE TAKEAWAY

A reasonable answer isn't always the best answer.

When two or more options seem possible, return to the details in the question. Ask yourself:

Which response most directly addresses the need or problem the question has identified?

That last distinction is exactly what I want this page to teach. **B and C aren't absurd choices**, which makes this a much better example of “one best answer” reasoning than a question with two obviously wrong distractors.

Put It All Together

You've seen how careful reading can help you identify what a question is asking, avoid making assumptions, and distinguish a reasonable response from the best response.

Now it's your turn.

READ → IDENTIFY → DECIDE → CHECK

READ
Read the entire question. What information have you been given? Don't add details that aren't there.

IDENTIFY
What exactly are you being asked? Pay attention to words such as first, next, best, and most appropriate.

DECIDE
Before choosing a response, think about what the best answer should accomplish based on the information provided.

CHECK
Compare the response options. Eliminate those that don't answer the question, then choose the option that best fits.

TRY IT YOURSELF

Practice Question 1

During a rapidly evolving disease outbreak, a public health nurse receives preliminary case data that is still being verified. **Which communication strategy best supports situational awareness and preserves public trust?**

A. Release all available information in real time to prevent misinformation and promote transparency.
B. Provide clear and consistent updates and acknowledge that guidance may evolve as more information becomes available.
C. Prioritize consistent messaging and release information once all partners have reviewed and confirmed case data.

My answer: _____

Before moving on, ask yourself:

What is this question asking me to determine?
What information in the scenario should guide my response?
Which answer balances timely communication with the uncertainty of preliminary information?

Practice Question 2

A public health nurse is facilitating a community meeting to gather input on a proposed neighborhood violence-prevention initiative. Most residents from historically marginalized groups are quiet, while a few dominate the discussion. **Which action would best promote inclusive communication?**

A. Actively participate in the discussion to maintain focus and efficiency.
B. Invite input from quieter participants and establish shared discussion norms.
C. Send out a survey giving the residents the opportunity to provide confidential input following the meeting.

My answer: _____

This time, work through the question on your own: **READ → IDENTIFY → DECIDE → CHECK**

Choose your answer before turning the page.

Check Your Approach

Now compare your answers with the reasoning below. The goal isn't only to see whether you selected the correct response. Pay attention to **how the information in the question leads you to the best answer.**

Practice Question 1
Best answer: B. Provide clear and consistent updates and acknowledge that guidance may evolve as more information becomes available.

> **READ…** The outbreak is rapidly evolving, and the available case data are still being verified.
> **IDENTIFY…** The question asks which communication strategy best supports situational awareness while preserving public trust.
> **DECIDE…** The response needs to provide useful, timely information without presenting preliminary information as final or withholding communication until every detail is confirmed.
> **CHECK**
> **A** releases information before it has been verified.
> **B** communicates clearly while acknowledging that information and guidance may change.
> **C** delays communication until all partners have reviewed and confirmed the data.
>
> **B best addresses both parts of the question.**

Practice Question 2
Best answer: B. Invite input from quieter participants and establish shared discussion norms.

> **READ…** A few people are dominating the community meeting while residents from historically marginalized groups are largely quiet.
> **IDENTIFY…** The question asks which action would best promote inclusive communication.
> **DECIDE…** The response should address the participation imbalance and create an opportunity for more voices to be heard.
> **CHECK**
> **A** could further limit opportunities for residents to participate by adding another voice to the discussion.
> **B** directly creates space for quieter participants and establishes expectations that support broader participation.
> **C** provides another way to gather input later, but it does not address the lack of inclusive participation occurring during the meeting.
> **B is the best answer.**

TAKE THIS APPROACH WITH YOU

When you encounter a CPHN exam question:

READ what is actually there.
IDENTIFY exactly what the question is asking.
DECIDE what the best response should accomplish.
CHECK each option against the question.

Your public health nursing knowledge and experience are what help you answer CPHN exam questions. **Careful reading helps you apply them to the question in front of you.**

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