

Ep #162: How to Pass Your 3P Exam



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With Your Host

Anna Miller

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Welcome to the *Real Deal Nurse Practitioner Club*, the podcast for nurses who are ready to pass their boards and thrive in their careers as real deal nurse practitioners. I'm Anna and I'm the Director of Nursing Content at Blueprint Test Prep. Whether you're deep in exam prep or stepping into practice, I've got you. It is time to become the confident, knowledgeable NP that you're meant to be. Let's dive in.

Anna: Hey, hey, everyone. Welcome back to another episode of *The Real Deal Nurse Practitioner Club*. I'm Anna, and today, Alex and I are talking about a topic that causes a little bit of stress early on in NP programs, and that's that 3P exam.

Alex: Hi, friends. If you're listening to this thinking, why am I so nervous about an exam that doesn't even certify me? You are not alone.

Anna: Yeah, that 3P exam, it can feel so high pressure and overwhelming, especially because for a lot of programs. Now this is not taken in every single school. It's not in every single program, but for many programs, you have to pass that 3P exam before you can move on in your program and start clinical rotations.

So today, we're going to break down what the 3P exam actually is, why schools require it, how it's different from boards, common mistakes people make, and our best strategies to help you pass the first time.

Alex: Yes, and let's start with the basics. The 3P exam stands for pathophysiology, pharmacology, and physical assessment. It's designed to assess whether you're ready to safely move from the classroom learning into clinicals.

Anna: Yeah, and everybody is going to take those 3P classes, no matter what program you're in. You're going to have your patho, you're going to have your pharm, you're going to have your physical assessment class.

But really, this 3P exam, think of it as a gatekeeper exam. Like it's not about certification, but it's really making sure you have the foundational knowledge to understand disease processes, perform history and physical

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exams, and understand the fundamentals of safe prescribing. And a lot of students ask like, why is this exam even necessary? Or my friend's program didn't make them take it, why do I have to take it?

But here's the honest answer for you. Clinical rotations involve real patients and real diagnoses and real consequences.

Alex: Yes, you have to understand the foundations, not only to be able to build upon them, but to make safe decisions in clinicals. For example, schools want to know that you can recognize abnormal versus normal findings and identify any red flags that might need to be escalated. The 3P exam is meant to confirm you're clinically ready, not just academically progressing.

Anna: Yeah, and I know it can feel so stressful, but it's really meant to protect you, not to punish you. It's really meant to set you up for success. And one mistake I'd say that people make is studying for this 3P exam just like they would study for the certification exam, but I'm telling you, like these are not the same.

Alex: Exactly. Boards focus more on application and clinical decision making. The 3P exam focuses on foundational understanding. So you'll see more questions like, which finding is expected in, or which medication mechanism explains XYZ?

Anna: Yeah, it's a lot less about the what do you do next questions that boards love and more of those like, do you understand why something is happening? So if you are trying to jump straight into those board level thinking questions without mastering basics, you're going to get tripped up.

So let's talk about why the 3P exam can still feel so hard even though it's those foundational concepts. The first is absolutely content overload, right? You are being tested on three massive areas at once and they are all equally important and they are all fair game.

Alex: Yes, and second, lack of integration of those 3Ps. So students often study patho, pharm, and physical assessment separately, but the exam will

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very likely ask you to connect those concepts. So for example, here is a disease process, here are the physical exam findings it causes, and here are the medications that treat it.

Anna: Yeah, I remember my undergraduate nursing program actually combined our two semesters of patho and pharm and we had pathopharmacology instead of two separate classes, so we had that for a whole year so that it was spread out more and they could really integrate it, which was really helpful.

But I know that's not always common. And really that third thing I feel like trips people up that I see is passive studying. So what I mean by this is you're just reading notes or rewatching lectures, and that can feel really productive, but it doesn't always translate to exam performance.

So you want to make sure that you take the time to really understand these fundamentals because it will set you up for success for the rest of NP school, for your clinicals, for your board certification exam in the future, and of course, your future career as a real deal NP as we call them.

Alex: Absolutely. And so instead of memorizing just isolated facts, we recommend studying by body system. So for example, study cardiovascular pathology, and then the physical exam findings associated, and then common medications together. This mirrors how questions are written and helps you build the big picture.

Anna: Yeah, just think if you know why something happens, then you don't need to memorize every single detail. So you can just ask yourself, why does this disease cause this symptom? Or why does this medication work here, but not there? And why is this finding concerning? And that level of understanding is what carries you through the exam and through tricky questions.

Alex: For sure. So let's talk about study strategy. You cannot study for the 3P exam without practice questions. You know, questions help you identify your strong and your weak areas. It helps you learn how content is actually

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tested, and it builds confidence under exam-like conditions. And you know this is where resources like our 3P question bank come in because it's written specifically to reflect how that 3P concept is usually tested.

Anna: Also, just from our experience, students often underprepare for physical assessment specifically, especially things like heart sounds, lung findings, and cranial nerves or neurological deficits, and these show up a lot more than you'd think.

Alex: Yes, and those concepts are very important to carry with you all throughout school, your certification exam, and your career. So definitely keep that in mind.

And just a heads up that cramming rarely works for 3P. Remember, this covers three large domains and all the body systems. So we recommend starting early, studying in shorter, consistent sessions, mixing content review with those practice questions we talked about, and really taking the time to review rationales, not just the right answers.

Anna: Absolutely. So let's do a quick example to show how integration of all 3Ps matters. So let's say we have a patient. They present with shortness of breath, crackles in the lungs, and bilateral lower extremity edema. Alex, what systems are you thinking about right now?

Alex: For sure, cardiovascular and pulmonary. So definitely some big indicators here for heart failure.

Anna: Exactly. Remember we had that shortness of breath, the crackles, the edema. So let's connect these 3Ps. With heart failure, we have the patho, so fluid overload, decreased cardiac output. On physical exam, we have those findings we mentioned, crackles, edema, increased work of breathing.

And then the pharm, think about diuretics to offload that fluid because remember we talked about the patho being fluid overload. And then we can think of things like ACE inhibitors and beta blockers to improve the heart function and decrease the cardiac workload. And we can take that and

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apply that to any of those patho concepts. And if you can think like that, you're thinking the way the 3P exam wants you to think.

Alex: So if you're feeling anxious about the 3P exam, remember this, it's not about being perfect and memorizing absolutely everything. It's about proving that you have a safe, solid foundation. And passing it means you're one big step closer to clinicals and ultimately becoming a nurse practitioner.

Anna: Now, in our next episode, we're going to switch gears away from the 3P exam and we're going to talk about the primary care certification exams and really dive into the ANCC versus the AANP and talk about which one to take. But thank you for listening to this episode, and we will see you in our next one. And good luck with your 3P exam if you are taking that soon.

Thanks for listening to another episode of the *Real Deal Nurse Practitioner Club*. If you want more information about the different types of support that we offer to students and new nurse practitioners, you can visit npreviews.com. We'll see you next week.