OSCE checklist for pulse and respiration

An OSCE checklist for pulse and respiration covers explaining the task, finding the radial pulse, counting rate and noting rhythm and strength, then counting respirations without the patient noticing and recording both.

OSCE checklist for pulse and respiration: steps to practise

1. Clean your hands, introduce yourself, confirm the patient's name and date of birth against the wristband, and explain that you will check the pulse.
2. Gain consent and ask the patient to sit or lie at rest for a few minutes, with the arm supported.
3. Place your index and middle fingers, not your thumb, on the radial pulse at the thumb side of the wrist.
4. Press lightly until you feel the beat, then count for 30 seconds and double it only if the rhythm is regular.
5. Count for a full minute if the pulse is irregular, and note that it is irregular.
6. Note rate, rhythm (regular or irregular) and strength (strong, weak or thready).
7. Keep your fingers on the wrist and do not announce that you are now counting breaths.
8. Watch the chest rise and fall and count one rise and one fall as one breath, for a full minute.
9. Note the depth, effort, use of neck muscles, the patient's colour and any noise such as wheeze.
10. Record both values with the time on the observation chart and compare them with the previous set.
11. Report an abnormal rate, a new irregular pulse or laboured breathing to the nurse in charge straight away, using NEWS2 and your local escalation policy.
12. Leave the patient comfortable with the call bell in reach and clean your hands.

What candidates commonly forget

- Using the thumb, which has its own pulse
- Pressing too hard and stopping the pulse

- Counting breaths for only 15 seconds
- Telling the patient you are counting breaths, which changes the pattern
- Not recording rhythm and strength with the rate
- Not reporting a new irregular pulse or a high breathing rate

Local policy comes first

This is our own practice checklist. Your college, hospital or country may do some steps differently. Where local policy and this list disagree, follow local policy.

Practise the hands-on steps with a classmate or in a skills lab, because an AI patient cannot watch your technique. You can practise the talking part with an AI patient, and try one station free with no sign-up. Next, try Fever and rapid breathing in general practice. Back to the nursing foundation OSCE page: nursing foundation OSCE, or see the full OSCE checklist list.

Common questions

How do I take a pulse in an OSCE?

Use two fingers on the radial pulse, count the beats for 30 seconds and double it if regular, or count a full minute if irregular, and note rate, rhythm and strength.

Why count respirations while holding the wrist?

People change their breathing when they know it is being watched. Holding the wrist as if still counting the pulse avoids this.

What if I cannot find the radial pulse?

Say so, try the other wrist and change your finger pressure. If the patient looks unwell, call for help at once. If the patient is unresponsive and not breathing normally, call for help and start basic life support as you have been trained.

What should I report?

Any rate outside the normal bands on your chart, a new irregular pulse, laboured or noisy breathing, or a patient who looks unwell.

Sources

- NMC: standards of proficiency for registered nurses
- Royal College of Physicians: National Early Warning Score (NEWS2)

Checked 2026-11-13. Fees and rules change, so confirm them with the regulator before you book.