

nurse's newsletter

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Nurses - Careers Abroad

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The Nurse's Head Gear

A nurse's cap or nursing cap is part of the female nurse's uniform, introduced early in the history of the profession. The nursing cap was originally used by Florence Nightingale in the 1800s. The cap's original purpose was to keep the [nurse's](#) hair neatly in place and present a modest appearance. In some schools, a *capping ceremony* presents new nursing students their caps before beginning their clinical (hospital) training. Male nurses do not wear caps.

The nurse's cap was derived from the nun's habit and developed over time into two types:

- A *long* cap, that covers much of the nurse's hair, and
- A *short* cap, that sits atop the nurse's hair (common in the United Kingdom).

The nursing cap is a nearly universally recognized symbol of nursing. It allows patients to quickly identify a nurse in the hospital.

The use of nurses' caps in the medical facilities of United States (and many other nations) all but disappeared by the late 1980s with the near universal adoption of "[scrubs](#)." Also, the rapid growth of the number of men in nursing also necessitated a unisex uniform. However, nurses' caps can still be found in many developing nations, as well as some countries where women still make up the overwhelming majority of nurses.



Two Button Nurse's cap



Nurse Cap Embroidery design



Deluxe Nurse cap

Nurse Cap History

The nurse cap is distinctive in both purpose and style. Its lineage is as long as that of the bridal veil, which, at one time, symbolized women's obedience and humility. For the nurse, the cap was a symbol of service to humankind.

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At the turn of the century, many women had very long hair which the nurse's cap was intended to hold to maintain the hygienic environment necessary for patient care. Early caps covered the whole head and were considered unbecoming by nurses. Eventually, these "dust-caps" were replaced by small caps which covered only the knot of hair at the top of the head.

Cap design identified its wearer's alma mater. A black band sewn on the cap signified senior level or graduate status at many schools, and sometimes identified the head nurse on a clinical unit. Its origin is unknown; some people believed the black band was a sign of mourning for Florence Nightingale. Nurse caps are not worn in most health care institutions today because they no longer serve the purposes for which they were designed and can interfere with care giving.

University of Iowa Graduate Nurse Cap

circa 1944

This peaked-style graduate nurse cap replaced the "muffin" style cap worn at University Hospitals in the 1920's. Stiffened by either starch or sugar water, the linen cap could be folded flat and carried in a book to maintain its shape. Before the Bruck Company of Chicago began manufacturing the caps, nurses fashioned their own caps from men's handkerchiefs.

At The State University of Iowa, as the UI was called before 1955, nursing students wore the same basic cap throughout most of their training. Donor Elizabeth Means, RN, remembers receiving her first cap and apron after the mandatory one-semester probationary period. "It was a big thrill because when you first walked down the ward with the cap and bib on, the patients would call you 'Nurse,'" Mrs. Means said. "Capping" was, for the students, the first step toward achieving their professional identity.



Nurse's Hat



Nurse's Cotton Hat



Nurse's Cap



Nurses with caps



NON -Woven Bouffant Nurse Cap



Surgical Cap
Adjustable cap with flowing
tie or fixed ties at the back



NEW- The Beret Bouffant **

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**** [The New Beret Bouffant - a surgical cap is a new style of bouffant cap. It has an additional section of fabric in the front to give it a more roomy and bloused look. And, the fit is adjustable. There is a cord lock in the back of the cap so the elastic band can be adjusted to give you the most comfortable fit. (<http://sparklingearth.com/>)]**

Nurse's uniform with cap case Traditionally, a nurse's first cap was hand-made by a friend or fellow student and worn cuffed and bobby-pinned to the hair. "Most of us got a sore place on our head (from the pins)," Mrs. Means remembers. A quarter-inch black band was added to the senior student's cap and a half-inch black band was worn by graduate nurses. The graduate nurse also exchanged the striped student uniform for a white uniform.

Rules for wearing the cap were very strict. Mrs. Means recalls being among the many nursing students who dared to alter the official shape of their caps by turning out the corners to create "wings," in imitation of the Mercy Hospital nurse caps. "I can remember being told to stand up and 'get rid of my wings' in class," Mrs. Means said.

Smoking cigarettes while wearing the cap was also prohibited. When nurses were not wearing their caps, common practice was to carry them inside their apron bibs.

"Much respect was awarded to the nurse cap and uniform at the University," Mrs. Means recalls. "It gave us a sense of pride and identification and it was always interesting because you could tell what school a girl graduated from by the cap she wore."

[Gift of Elizabeth Keyser Means, RN, Iowa City]



Nurse's uniform with cap case



Nurse's caps that illustrate the different styles

Mount Sinai Nurse's Cap

circa 1945

This nurse's cap originated from the Mount Sinai Hospital School of Nursing* in New York City. Ruth Becker earned it in 1945 and wore it until her retirement from the field in 1954. In 1952 Mrs. Becker moved from New York to Iowa City where she worked at University Hospitals. Most of the nurses working at University Hospitals at that time were local graduates who were unfamiliar with this "foreign head-dress."

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Mrs. Becker was reminded of her alma mater every 3 to 4 months, when her unwashable cap became soiled and she had to order a new supply from a single source in New York. At Mount Sinai, this style of cap signified the change from student to graduate status. The Mount Sinai students used a training cap until graduation, when they earned the right to don the ruffled cap with its black stripe. At The University of Iowa, nursing students wore the same basic cap as students and as graduates.

* The school no longer exists. [Given by Ruth H. Becker, RN, Iowa City, in memory of her father, Hans M. Salzmann, MD]

Slight modifications in the uniform accompanied the progression from probationary to graduate status. After a probationary period of one semester, "probies" earned their first cap and bib and became Freshmen. At Junior status, they earned a patch which they sewed on their left sleeve. Seniors earned the right to apply a quarter-inch band of black ribbon to their caps; this band would be replaced by a half-inch band at graduation. Throughout their careers, nurses would continue to wear the cap style unique to their alma mater.

Some claim the cap is a potential carrier of [bacteria](#) and other disease-causing [pathogens](#) that could then be transmitted from patient to patient.^[1] However, such incidents can be prevented when infection control procedures are followed.

Reference: *A history of the nursing uniform. AJN, American Journal of Nursing. 104(4):40-48, April 2004 & Published material taken from Wikipedia & University of Iowa (medical Museum)*

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