



The Nova Scotia College of Nursing (NSCN) is the regulatory body for licensed practical nurses (LPNs), registered nurses (RNs) and nurse practitioners (NPs) in Nova Scotia. Our mandate is to protect the public by promoting the provision of safe, competent, ethical and compassionate nursing services by our registrants. The term nurse in this document refers to LPNs, RNs and NPs unless otherwise stated.

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Our practice support tools are developed using current reference material. The source of this material is available upon request.



This tool is a resource for nurses in all practice settings to help them understand their professional accountabilities related to personal and professional use of social media. Like all regulatory tools, use this document in conjunction with employer policy, applicable legislation and the standards of practice and codes of ethics for LPNs, RNs, and NPs.

What is Social Media?

[Social media](#) is online and mobile tools used to share opinions, information and experiences through written messaging, images, video or audio clips and includes websites and applications used for social networking. Some examples of current social media platforms include but are not limited to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, TikTok, Reddit, discussion forums and message boards.

Nurses can be called upon by clients, former clients, relatives and friends, to provide informal nursing advice via social media platforms due to the ease of access. We recommend nurses avoid engaging in this practice due to risks to both the client and the nurse.

Risks of Social Media use by Nurses

Social media can benefit clients and nurses. However, there are risks if nurses use social media inappropriately.

RISK TO CLIENTS

- Privacy and confidentiality breached.
- Decision-making based on misinformation, unqualified medical opinions and non-evidence informed health information.
- Missed care or lack of guidance or follow-up. An interaction over Facebook does not equate to a visit to a primary care provider or an emergency department.

RISK TO NURSES

- Informal exchange over social media does not enable the nurses to conduct a comprehensive assessment and physical examination of the client and therefore can lead to inadequate collection of [personal health information](#).
- The nature of online exchanges may prevent the nurse from accurately verifying the client's identity.
- If nursing advice based on an online assessment is provided over social media, the exchange may not be properly retained in the client's medical record.
- Any information the nurse shares online is not considered confidential and could be shared, saved and distributed by others.

RISK TO THE PROFESSION

When nurses do not consider all the factors, there is the risk of public confidence in the profession being damaged by inaccurate or unprofessional postings.

Nurse's Professional Obligation and Accountability

If a nurse assesses the risks and determines the benefit outweighs the risk, they may choose to use social media as a tool to provide nursing services, or they may choose to use social media in their personal lives. It is important that nurses understand their standards of practice and code of ethics regarding confidentiality, therapeutic boundaries and professional presence, as they are all applicable when nurses use social media in any capacity.

Risk Management

- You are accountable to understand how the standards of practice, code of ethics and practice guidelines apply to your social media use.
- Ensure you understand that inappropriate use of social media may result in a complaint to your employer or NSCN.

PROFESSIONAL PRESENCE

Social media is a public forum which includes private groups, direct messages and messages to and/or from 'personal' accounts. When nurses decide to use social media and enter a public space, they must always uphold their [standards of practice](#) and maintain a [professional presence](#). Nurses are expected to use the same level of professionalism in online interactions as they do in face-to-face interactions.

Risk Management

- If you identify yourself as a nurse online, whether in a biography section, a specific post, or a photo, you immediately create a connection between your personal and professional life and as such, you are expected to uphold your professional standards as a nurse.
- Do not offer specific health-related advice in response to questions or comments, as an appropriate [therapeutic nurse-client relationship](#) has not been established.
- Keep work-related social media activities separate from personal social media activities, especially if you use social media in your nursing role.
- Consider the methods you may have available to address work-related incidents, colleague or workplace concerns before posting on social media. If you choose to use social media to address these issues, keep your posts focused on the facts and your observations.
- Be mindful that the information you post may lead others to believe you cannot provide safe and unbiased care.
- Consider not identifying yourself as a nurse in your online profile.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY

Nurses are accountable to maintain the [confidentiality](#) and privacy of clients and co-workers' information. A breach of confidentiality or privacy, even inadvertently, can damage the nurse-client relationship and negatively impact the nursing profession. Privacy breaches occur with far less information than you think. Ensure you report confidentiality and privacy breaches immediately to your employer.

Risk Management

- Ensure you understand that posting anonymously or under a pseudonym does not protect you against the possible consequences of a breach of confidentiality.
- Do not post, repost, transmit or disseminate any information that may be reasonably anticipated to violate the client's rights to confidentiality, privacy, or otherwise degrade or embarrass the client.
- Do not collect or transmit client-related images using your personal device, even with the client's consent.

PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

[Professional boundaries](#) are the defining lines that separate the professional, therapeutic behaviour of a nurse from any behaviour that, well intentioned or not, could potentially harm or reduce the benefit of nursing care. Professional boundaries must be maintained in both in-person and online nurse-client relationships.

Risk Management

- Identifying yourself as a nurse on social media platforms may lead to the perception that you are acting in a professional capacity leading to a blurring of professional boundaries.
- Ensure you define and maintain professional boundaries, especially if you are in the dual role of a friend and a nurse.
- Do not engage in personal social media relationships with current and vulnerable former clients and their families.
- If an online contact becomes a client, make sure you do not unintentionally cross boundaries.
- Do not accept connection requests from or initiate a connection request with current, former or vulnerable former clients or their families. Connecting in this way could be interpreted as a continuation of the [nurse-client relationship](#) or that the client is entitled to access your services in ways other clients are not.

OBLIGATION TO EMPLOYER POLICIES

Nurses are accountable to ensure they are aware of and comply with evidence-informed employer [policies](#). If you do not have a social media policy, you should work with your employer to develop one.

Risk Management

- Review and follow employer policies related to the use of personal and professional social media.
- Do not speak on behalf of your employer or the profession unless authorized to do so.
- Do not conduct professional discussions or communication on social media without clear employer policies and processes.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Nurses are accountable to balance their right to express personal concerns and opinions regarding health care with the responsibility to maintain the public's trust in the nursing profession.

Risk Management

- Your online conduct has the potential to cross into [professional misconduct](#) or [conduct unbecoming the profession](#).

It is not appropriate to attempt to resolve concerns with your employer or others in the health care system on a public social media forum.

Key Points

- Using social media as a tool to deliver nursing services is not without risk.
- You are accountable to understand these risks and should you choose to use social media in the delivery of nursing services, you must work to mitigate these risks.
- You are accountable to know how your employer policies, standards of practice, code of ethics and practice guidelines apply and connect to your social media use.
- You are accountable to understand your professional obligation to maintain confidentiality, privacy and professional boundaries.
- Your individual online presence and actions have the potential to negatively impact your clients, other healthcare providers, your employer or the entire nursing profession.

Suggested readings

- [Documentation Guidelines for Nurses](#)
- [Standards of Practice](#)
- [Code of Ethics](#)
- [Professional Presence Practice Guideline](#)
- [Professional Boundaries and the Nurse-Client Relationship Practice Guideline](#)

For further information on anything contained within this tool, please contact an NSCN Practice Consultant at practice@nscn.ca.