Hospitals, nursing homes and other healthcare employers use career fairs to hire hundreds of nurses each year. Here's what you can do before, during and after a career fair to land your job of choice.

**Before You Go**

- **Prepare Your Documents:** Have a counselor in your school's career center proofread your resume for errors. Print your resumes on professional paper, and put them in a folder or portfolio to stay wrinkle-free.

  Also, create a reference list. New grads can include one or two professors and a direct manager from any job they've held, especially healthcare positions. Be sure to list nurse preceptors you've worked closely with in hospitals.

- **Create a One-Minute Introduction:** Include your major, year and type of position you seek, suggests Trudi VanderPloeg, a career counselor at Hope College, which hosts an annual spring career fair for its nursing, premed and allied health sciences students.

  Sandi Niles, RN, BSN, nurse recruiter for the University of Michigan Health System, recommends thinking of the skills, experience and accomplishments you can present to the recruiter. "Be able to explain how they can benefit the facility you want to work for," she says. Nursing students lacking experience can discuss their goals and ambitions. Rehearse this *elevator pitch* for yourself and practice your *handshake*.

- **Do Your Research:** Get the list of employers who will be attending the fair, and do enough investigating to identify a handful you'd like to work for. Prepare good questions for each one to ease your conversation, impress the recruiter and yield information that will help you evaluate job openings.

  Niles suggests asking about nurse/patient ratios, work schedules, unions representing nurses, the various units' patient populations and each unit's patient-acuity levels. You'll also impress a recruiter by mentioning why you're interested in the company -- perhaps you have an interest in pediatric oncology, for example.

- **Get Your Outfit Ready:** You don't need to wear a business suit, but whatever you wear must be clean, professional and pressed. Women can wear slacks and a blouse topped with a sweater or jacket. Men should wear dress pants, dress shirt and a tie.

  "Clothes need to be conservative, particularly in nursing," says Andrea Krzysko, a teaching associate with the Urbana regional site of the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Nursing. "We do not want to see skin."

**At the Job Fair**

- **Focus on Your Target Employers:** "Go to someone in the middle of your list [first] to get the jitters out," Krzysko suggests. Then proceed to your top choices. Approach each recruiter confidently, and make eye contact. Greet them with your rehearsed introduction, and continue the conversation with your prepared questions and comments.

  Don't waste time grabbing job fair giveaways. "You're there for the $40,000-a-year job, not the 29-cent pen," Krzysko says.
Ask About Student Positions: Undergrads can learn about externships, internships, and nursing assistant and patient attendant positions, which can provide extra experience beyond clinical rotations for students seeking to enter higher-acuity units, such as telemetry or intensive care.

"We recommend that sophomores and juniors attend job fairs and begin the networking process," VanderPloeg says. "It's like informational interviewing. You're getting direct information rather than from the Web site." Plus, students can start targeting potential employers.

Ask About the Next Step: Find out whether you need to fill out an online application, call to schedule an interview or wait to hear from the recruiter. "Take notes right in front of the recruiter," Krzysko says. "Get the name and contact information of the follow-up people. You won't remember after the fair."

After the Job Fair

Review Your Notes: In many cases, it's appropriate to email a follow-up letter. Phoning recruiters is acceptable if they gave you their number, or you may need to wait to hear from them. If a few weeks go by with no word, send a follow-up letter to find out what happens next. Include a resume in case your first one got lost.

Relax: Career fairs are stressful, so have lunch with friends afterwards and unwind.