



Clinical Practice Frequently Asked Question

Q: What constitutes a proper handoff in the PACU? How should breaks be managed?

A: A proper handoff in the PACU is defined by ASPAN as the transfer and acceptance of patient care responsibility through effective communication. A key component of this process is providing the receiving nurse an opportunity to ask questions and review all relevant patient information to ensure continuity and safety of care.

When a nurse takes a break during Phase 1 recovery, the patient remains under continuous monitoring and must stay within the assigned nurse's line of sight. Before leaving, the nurse must give a complete handoff to the covering nurse, who then assumes full responsibility for the patient's care. The covering nurse should document care during this period, as they are actively managing the patient.

The phrase "watching the patient" can be misleading. A nurse who is on break or off the unit cannot monitor the patient; responsibility lies solely with the nurse physically present. Whenever care is transferred—even temporarily—this handoff should be clearly documented. Documentation practices may vary by facility, such as designated flowsheet sections or standardized documentation phrases.

In summary, patient monitoring and accountability always rest with the nurse providing direct, in-person care.