



California Cosmetology Operator

Practice test

April 6, 2026

Time limit: 120 minutes

Official exam page

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Online timed practice

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Answer key for this session (PDF):

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1. Which of the following describes a first-degree (superficial) burn?
 - A. Full thickness damage through all skin layers
 - B. Blistering and damage into the dermis
 - C. Redness and minor pain affecting only the epidermis, no blistering
 - D. Charring and nerve damage
2. The pH of the hair and scalp is approximately:
 - A. 7.0 — neutral
 - B. 8.5–9.5 — alkaline
 - C. 4.5–5.5 — slightly acidic
 - D. 2.0–3.0 — strongly acidic
3. What is the technical term for split ends?
 - A. Hypertrichosis
 - B. Trichoptilosis
 - C. Pityriasis
 - D. Alopecia
4. Which EPA registration category indicates a disinfectant is effective against both bacteria and viruses?
 - A. Quaternary ammonium compound at any concentration
 - B. Disinfectant labeled for household use only
 - C. Bacteriostatic disinfectant
 - D. Hospital-grade or broad-spectrum disinfectant
5. What is the purpose of wearing gloves when applying chemical services?
 - A. They improve grip on tools during chemical services
 - B. Required only when using bleach products
 - C. Protect from chemical burns, skin sensitization, and absorption of harmful chemicals
 - D. They eliminate the need for an SDS review

6. Hair texture is determined by the:
- A. Porosity of the hair shaft
 - B. Color depth of the melanin
 - C. Elasticity of the cortex bonds
 - D. Diameter of the individual hair strand
7. What is a scalp massage most beneficial for during a shampoo service?
- A. Removes product buildup from the scalp
 - B. Stimulates blood circulation to nourish hair follicles
 - C. Reduces scalp oil production
 - D. Opens the cuticle for better product penetration
8. Which of the following best describes a bactericide?
- A. A chemical that inhibits bacterial growth without killing them
 - B. A natural antibacterial derived from plants
 - C. A chemical that kills bacteria
 - D. A product that removes bacteria without chemicals
9. What is the recommended safety precaution before applying any chemical relaxer?
- A. Applying developer to open the cuticle first
 - B. Performing a scalp/hairline analysis and applying a protective base
 - C. Applying heat to the scalp to open follicles
 - D. Pre-softening the hair with a clarifying shampoo
10. Under California law, a licensed cosmetologist may perform which of the following services without an additional license?
- A. Chemical services only with a cosmetology license
 - B. Haircutting and styling only
 - C. Nail services require a separate license in all cases
 - D. Haircutting, styling, chemical services, facials, and basic nail care within BBC scope
11. What is alopecia?
- A. Hair loss
 - B. An allergic reaction to color chemicals
 - C. A fungal scalp infection
 - D. Excessive hair growth
12. Which of the following describes hair that has been chemically over-processed?
- A. Tightly closed cuticle with low moisture absorption
 - B. Extremely low porosity and high elasticity
 - C. High shine and smooth cuticle
 - D. Extreme porosity, poor elasticity, gummy texture when wet
13. The four basic haircut shapes are:
- A. Solid, graduated, layered, and combination
 - B. Blunt, tapered, feathered, and textured
 - C. Rounded, square, oval, and triangular
 - D. One-length, stacked, uniform, and graduated
14. Which chemical product is prohibited from use in California nail salons?
- A. Acetone nail polish remover
 - B. Liquid methyl methacrylate (MMA) monomer
 - C. UV gel nail products
 - D. Hydrogen peroxide developer
15. What does the term "on-the-scalp lightener" mean?
- A. A lightener mixed with developer only — no powder
 - B. A lightener used only on previously colored hair
 - C. A lightener formulated to be applied directly to the scalp safely
 - D. A lightener that activates only at high temperatures
16. What does "sanitation" mean in the context of a salon?
- A. Reduce microbial contamination to safe levels but not eliminate all pathogens
 - B. Remove all physical debris from a surface
 - C. Kill all bacteria but not viruses
 - D. Destroy all microbial life including spores
17. A comedone is:
- A. A clogged hair follicle — open (blackhead) or closed (whitehead)
 - B. A superficial fungal skin condition
 - C. A bacterial skin infection
 - D. A type of skin tumor
18. What is the purpose of using a toner after lightening hair?
- A. Protect the scalp during a bleach application
 - B. Add warmth and golden tones after lightening
 - C. Darken the hair to the desired final level
 - D. Neutralize unwanted warm/brassy tones after bleaching

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19. In California, a client complaint against a licensed cosmetologist is filed with:
- The California Attorney General's office
 - The Better Business Bureau
 - The local county health department
 - The California Board of Barbering and Cosmetology (BBC)
20. Which of the following is the correct order for hand washing in a salon setting?
- Apply soap, wet hands, lather 10 seconds, rinse, air dry
 - Apply hand sanitizer instead of soap and water
 - Wet hands, rinse, apply soap, lather 5 seconds, dry
 - Wet hands, apply soap, lather 20 seconds, rinse, dry with clean towel
21. Under California law, a cosmetologist found practicing without a current, valid license is subject to:
- A misdemeanor — subject to fines and potential criminal charges
 - A written warning only
 - No penalty if unlicensed for less than 90 days
 - An automatic 30-day suspension
22. Which of the following conditions requires the licensee to refuse service?
- A client with dry, flaky scalp
 - A client with head lice (pediculosis)
 - A client with dandruff
 - A client with a minor cut on their arm
23. What is a texturizing technique used to remove bulk without shortening the overall length?
- Razor cutting
 - Slicing
 - Point cutting (notching)
 - Blunt cutting
24. A 45-degree elevation during a haircut produces:
- A blunt one-length cut
 - A graduated (stacked) effect — shorter at nape, longer above
 - A uniform layer throughout
 - No layering, just a straight horizontal line
25. The three primary hair colors on the color wheel used in cosmetology are:
- Red, yellow, and blue
 - Blue, green, and violet
 - Red, orange, and yellow
 - Orange, green, and violet
26. Hydrogen peroxide developer volume indicates:
- The amount of ammonia in the color formula
 - How long the developer takes to process
 - The pH of the developer
 - The oxidizing strength and amount of lift the developer provides
27. The cortex of the hair contains what bonds that give hair its shape?
- Hydrogen bonds and disulfide bonds
 - Salt bonds only
 - Covalent and ionic bonds only
 - Peptide bonds only
28. What is the term for the natural pigment that gives hair its color?
- Melanin
 - Sebum
 - Collagen
 - Keratin
29. What is the primary chemical used in most chemical hair relaxers?
- Hydrogen peroxide
 - Ammonium thioglycolate
 - Potassium hydroxide
 - Sodium hydroxide (lye)
30. The purpose of a cuticle softener or remover in a manicure service is to:
- Harden the cuticle for easier removal
 - Break down dead cuticle skin so it can be pushed back or removed safely
 - Strengthen the nail plate before applying gel
 - Disinfect the cuticle area before a nail service
31. What is the primary protein that makes up the hair shaft?
- Melanin
 - Collagen
 - Keratin
 - Elastin

32. The three main layers of the hair shaft from outer to inner are:
- A. Cortex, cuticle, medulla
 - B. Cuticle, cortex, medulla
 - C. Medulla, cortex, cuticle
 - D. Epidermis, dermis, cortex
33. What does SPF (Sun Protection Factor) measure?
- A. How resistant the skin is to UVA rays
 - B. The percentage of chemical UV filters in the formula
 - C. The moisturizing level of the product
 - D. How long a sunscreen extends the skin's natural UVB protection
34. A licensee cuts a client and draws blood. What is the correct first response?
- A. Discard all tools and continue with new ones
 - B. Stop service, cover wound, remove and disinfect contaminated tools
 - C. Continue the service wearing gloves
 - D. Apply antiseptic and continue immediately
35. EPA-registered salon disinfectants must be effective against which three categories of microorganisms?
- A. Bacteria and viruses only
 - B. Bacteria only
 - C. Bacteria, viruses, and fungi
 - D. Viruses and fungi only
36. Which of the following nail conditions requires the cosmetologist to refuse nail services?
- A. Brittle nails (onychorrhexis)
 - B. Nail biting (onychophagy)
 - C. White spots (leukonychia)
 - D. Onychomycosis (nail fungus)
37. What is the nail matrix?
- A. The visible nail plate above the finger
 - B. The nail groove on the sides of the nail
 - C. The cuticle that overlaps the nail plate
 - D. The tissue beneath the base of the nail plate that produces the nail plate
38. Single-use items such as neck strips, cotton rounds, and wooden applicators must be:
- A. Used once then discarded
 - B. Disinfected and stored for reuse
 - C. Washed with soap and water between clients
 - D. Autoclaved between clients
39. Safety Data Sheets (SDS) are required to provide information about:
- A. Pricing and wholesale ordering information
 - B. Instructions for mixing chemical formulas
 - C. Hazard information, safe handling, PPE requirements, and emergency response
 - D. Only the product ingredients and fragrance profile
40. A strand test before a chemical service is performed to:
- A. Measure the hair's natural pH level
 - B. Confirm the correct developer volume to use
 - C. Check the client's allergy to PPD
 - D. Test timing, color result, and hair condition to avoid over-processing
41. What is the minimum contact time required for most EPA-registered disinfectants to effectively kill pathogens?
- A. 30 minutes
 - B. 10 minutes
 - C. 5 minutes
 - D. 1 minute
42. Under California law, a cosmetologist may have their license revoked for which of the following?
- A. Missing a single license renewal deadline
 - B. Fraud in obtaining the license, repeated violations, practicing while impaired, or gross negligence
 - C. Working in a county other than the one on the license
 - D. Using a product brand not listed on the BBC website
43. What is the correct order of steps when disinfecting tools at a cosmetology or barbering station?
- A. Disinfect, rinse, clean, dry
 - B. Clean, rinse, disinfect, rinse, dry
 - C. Rinse, disinfect, clean, dry
 - D. Disinfect, clean, rinse, dry
44. California BBC inspectors have the authority to enter a licensed cosmetology establishment:
- A. Only with a court order
 - B. During business hours without prior notice
 - C. Only on scheduled inspection dates
 - D. Only after a formal complaint has been filed

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45. What is the function of the dermal papilla?
- Produces the hair's natural oil (sebum)
 - Contains melanocytes that produce hair pigment
 - Supplies nutrients to the hair matrix cells via blood vessels, driving hair growth
 - Determines the natural curl pattern of the hair
46. What is the purpose of a patch test (skin allergy test) before a hair color service?
- Check for allergic reaction to color chemicals 24–48 hours before the service
 - Check if the hair is healthy enough for color
 - Determine the natural level and tone of the hair
 - Test if the developer will process the hair evenly
47. When performing a color retouch service, the new growth is processed first because:
- The ends are more resistant to color than new growth
 - Scalp heat makes the ends process faster
 - Process the ends first since they need more color
 - New growth is more porous and processes faster
48. What nail condition is characterized by separation of the nail plate from the nail bed?
- Leukonychia
 - Onychomycosis
 - Onycholysis
 - Paronychia
49. HIV is classified as which type of pathogen?
- A bloodborne pathogen
 - A food-borne pathogen
 - A waterborne pathogen
 - An airborne pathogen
50. The three layers of the skin from outermost to innermost are:
- Cuticle, cortex, medulla
 - Dermis, epidermis, subcutis
 - Epidermis, dermis, subcutis (hypodermis)
 - Subcutis, dermis, epidermis
51. Under California Health and Safety Code, cosmetology establishments must maintain hot and cold running water:
- Only licensed medical facilities are required to have running water
 - Hot and cold running water accessible for sanitation and handwashing
 - Water is optional if alcohol-based sanitizers are used
 - Only cold water is required
52. What is the primary route of transmission for head lice in a salon?
- Contaminated water in the shampoo bowl
 - Skin-to-skin contact with the hands
 - Direct head-to-head contact and shared tools, combs, and linens
 - Airborne droplets in the salon
53. What is the purpose of a base color application in hair coloring?
- Depositing color at the roots only to match the existing colored length
 - Using high-lift color to dramatically lighten
 - Applying color to the full length of the hair
 - Applying a toner to neutralize brassy tones
54. As of January 1, 2022, how many training hours are required to qualify for the California Cosmetology Operator written exam?
- 1,600 hours
 - 1,000 hours
 - 600 hours
 - 2,000 hours
55. The California cosmetology written exam is available in which languages as of 2024?
- English, Spanish, Korean, Simplified Chinese, Vietnamese, and Tagalog
 - English, French, and Spanish
 - English and Spanish only
 - English only
56. Under California law, the minimum age requirement to obtain a cosmetology license is:
- 16 years old
 - 21 years old
 - 17 years old
 - 18 years old
57. Which of the following is a non-porous surface that can be effectively disinfected?
- A metal shear blade
 - A wooden cuticle pusher
 - A fabric cape
 - A porous sponge applicator

58. The term "pathogen" refers to:
- A. A type of allergen found in hair dye
 - B. Any microorganism capable of causing disease
 - C. A virus that only affects plants
 - D. Any chemical substance found in salon products
59. A California cosmetology establishment may employ an unlicensed person to perform which of the following tasks?
- A. Perform blowouts with supervision
 - B. Reception, scheduling, and retail tasks only
 - C. Apply color with gloves
 - D. Shampoo and condition client hair
60. California SB 803, effective January 1, 2022, created a new license type for professionals who want to provide hairstyling services without chemical services. This license is called:
- A. Cosmetology Apprentice
 - B. Hairstylist
 - C. Nail Technician
 - D. Esthetician
61. What is the term for excessive, unwanted hair growth on the face or body?
- A. Hypertrichosis
 - B. Monilethrix
 - C. Trichoptilosis
 - D. Alopecia
62. The California BBC requires that disinfectant solutions used on implements be:
- A. Soap and water is sufficient
 - B. Any household bleach solution
 - C. Rubbing alcohol only
 - D. EPA-registered hospital-grade disinfectants per manufacturer instructions
63. How often must disinfectant solution in a wet sanitizer jar be changed?
- A. Once a month
 - B. Daily or whenever visibly contaminated
 - C. After every single use
 - D. Once a week
64. What is the active ingredient in most permanent wave solutions?
- A. Glycerol monothioglycolate
 - B. Sodium hydroxide
 - C. Ammonium thioglycolate
 - D. Hydrogen peroxide
65. How must clean, disinfected implements be stored?
- A. In an open container on the counter
 - B. Next to the disinfectant jar
 - C. In a clean, covered container or drawer separate from soiled tools
 - D. Wrapped in a paper towel until needed
66. What does hair elasticity refer to?
- A. The hair's natural color depth
 - B. The hair's ability to stretch and return to original length without breaking
 - C. The diameter of the hair strand
 - D. The hair's resistance to chemical services
67. Sebum is produced by which gland in the scalp?
- A. Sebaceous glands
 - B. The dermal papilla
 - C. Sudoriferous (sweat) glands
 - D. Arrector pili muscles
68. Which part of the hair is the only living portion?
- A. The hair shaft
 - B. The cuticle layer
 - C. The hair follicle (dermal papilla)
 - D. The cortex
69. What is the purpose of an autoclave?
- A. Use UV light to kill surface bacteria
 - B. Dry heat metal instruments to 400°F
 - C. Circulate disinfectant chemical through a sealed chamber
 - D. Use steam under pressure to sterilize instruments completely
70. Which type of conditioner penetrates the cortex and repairs hair from within?
- A. Balancing conditioner
 - B. Surface (coating) conditioner
 - C. Instant conditioner
 - D. Penetrating (protein/reconstructing) conditioner

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71. The California Board of Barbering and Cosmetology (BBC) is regulated under which state agency?
- A. California Department of Public Health
 - B. Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA)
 - C. California Labor Commission
 - D. California State Licensing Board
72. Which chemical process permanently straightens curly or wavy hair using ammonium thioglycolate?
- A. Keratin treatment
 - B. Thio (ammonium thioglycolate) relaxer
 - C. Sodium hydroxide relaxer
 - D. Guanidine relaxer
73. What term describes the process of destroying all microbial life including spores?
- A. Sanitation
 - B. Decontamination
 - C. Sterilization
 - D. Disinfection
74. Which type of disinfectant is EPA-registered and most commonly required for non-porous tools in Texas salons?
- A. Soap and hot water
 - B. EPA-registered hospital-grade disinfectant (quats or phenolics)
 - C. Bleach diluted in water
 - D. Isopropyl alcohol only
75. How must soiled towels and linens be stored in a Texas salon or barbershop?
- A. Left on the counter until end of day
 - B. Mixed with clean linens and washed later
 - C. In a closed, covered container separate from clean linens
 - D. On the floor near the workstation
76. During a permanent wave service, the neutralizer's purpose is to:
- A. Re-form the disulfide bonds in the new wave position
 - B. Open the cuticle for deeper processing
 - C. Remove the perm rod curl
 - D. Add shine and conditioning to the hair
77. A California cosmetology license must be renewed how often?
- A. Every year
 - B. Every three years
 - C. Every five years
 - D. Every two years
78. In California, a cosmetology establishment that operates without a valid establishment license is subject to:
- A. No penalty for first offense
 - B. Civil penalties and cease-and-desist orders
 - C. Only a written warning
 - D. Automatic permanent closure
79. California requires cosmetology students to complete what percentage of their required training hours before being eligible to take the written exam?
- A. 75% of required hours
 - B. No hours required before scheduling the exam
 - C. 100% of required hours verified by their school
 - D. 50% of required hours
80. A client arrives with an open sore on their scalp. The licensee should:
- A. Refuse service until the condition has healed
 - B. Refer the client to a dermatologist and continue the service
 - C. Proceed carefully while wearing gloves
 - D. Apply antiseptic and cover the area before proceeding
81. What is the hyponychium?
- A. The visible white tip of the nail plate
 - B. The nail matrix beneath the base of the nail
 - C. The cuticle fold over the nail base
 - D. The thickened skin beneath the free edge of the nail plate
82. A client has tinea capitis. What should the licensee do?
- A. Refuse service and refer the client to a physician
 - B. Complete the service but disinfect all tools after
 - C. Use an antifungal shampoo and continue
 - D. Proceed carefully using extra gloves
83. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the salon most commonly includes:
- A. Gloves, safety glasses, and protective aprons as appropriate
 - B. A face mask and hairnet only
 - C. A lab coat only
 - D. Nitrile gloves only, no other equipment required

84. What is the difference between cleaning and disinfecting?
- A. They are the same process
 - B. Disinfecting always comes before cleaning
 - C. Cleaning removes dirt physically; disinfecting uses chemicals to kill pathogens
 - D. Cleaning kills pathogens; disinfecting removes dirt
85. Under California law, a cosmetology establishment must display which of the following prominently?
- A. Establishment license and all individual practitioner licenses where visible to clients
 - B. Only the establishment license at the reception desk
 - C. No display is required — licenses are held digitally
 - D. Only the health inspection report
86. A client arrives with a visible nail fungus infection on one hand. What is the correct course of action?
- A. Refuse service and refer the client to a physician
 - B. Wear gloves and complete the full service
 - C. Perform the service only on the unaffected hand
 - D. Apply antifungal powder and proceed with service
87. Which scalp condition is characterized by white or yellowish flakes and itching?
- A. Psoriasis
 - B. Seborrheic dermatitis
 - C. Pityriasis (dandruff)
 - D. Tinea capitis
88. Effleurage in a facial massage refers to:
- A. Light, gliding, stroking movement
 - B. Vibrating movements using fingertips
 - C. Deep kneading of the muscle tissue
 - D. Rapid tapping or drumming movements
89. Which of the following is required on the label of every professional chemical product?
- A. The salon's name and purchase date
 - B. Pricing and expiration date only
 - C. Instructions for use and fragrance ingredients only
 - D. Product name, hazard warnings, and manufacturer information
90. The three phases of the hair growth cycle in correct order are:
- A. Anagen, catagen, telogen
 - B. Telogen, anagen, catagen
 - C. Anagen, telogen, catagen
 - D. Catagen, telogen, anagen
91. A client presents with psoriasis on their scalp. The cosmetologist should:
- A. Refuse service entirely
 - B. Perform the service carefully if no open or bleeding lesions are present
 - C. Apply medicated shampoo and continue
 - D. Refer to a physician and reschedule
92. Which pathogen causes ringworm (tinea capitis) of the scalp?
- A. A parasitic worm
 - B. A virus
 - C. A dermatophyte fungus
 - D. A bacterium
93. What is the arrector pili muscle?
- A. A blood vessel that nourishes the follicle
 - B. A small muscle attached to each follicle that causes hair to stand upright
 - C. A nerve ending in the scalp
 - D. The innermost layer of the hair shaft
94. Semi-permanent hair color differs from permanent color in that it:
- A. Contains no developer, does not lift, and fades gradually
 - B. Permanently alters the cortex structure
 - C. Contains developer and lifts natural hair color
 - D. Provides 100% gray coverage
95. How long must California cosmetology establishments retain employee and client service records?
- A. 3 years
 - B. 5 years
 - C. 1 year
 - D. 7 years
96. The term "porosity" in hair science refers to:
- A. How readily the hair absorbs and retains moisture
 - B. How quickly hair dries after washing
 - C. The natural wave pattern of the hair
 - D. The hair's resistance to breakage under tension

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97. Which layer of the epidermis contains melanocytes (pigment-producing cells)?
- A. Stratum germinativum (stratum basale)
 - B. The subcutis layer
 - C. The dermis
 - D. Stratum corneum (outermost layer)
98. California AB 451 (effective January 1, 2024) amended California Insurance Code Section 1677 to require BBC exams be offered in how many languages beyond English?
- A. Five additional languages: Spanish, Korean, Simplified Chinese, Vietnamese, and Tagalog
 - B. One language (Spanish only)
 - C. Three languages (Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese)
 - D. Two languages (Spanish and Chinese)
99. The wet hair cutting guide should be used because:
- A. Wet hair must never be cut with shears
 - B. Dry cutting is always more accurate
 - C. Wet hair is easier to control and section precisely
 - D. Wet cutting causes more split ends
100. What type of haircut creates a bevel where all hair is cut to the same length, falling to one level?
- A. Layered haircut
 - B. Graduated cut
 - C. Blunt (one-length) cut
 - D. Razor cut