

6 tips for using Anki flashcards: Make med school learning easier

SEP 6, 2018

Tanya Albert Henry

Contributing News Writer

With a voluminous amount of material to learn in medical school, many students have turned to the study-aid Anki as a way to help master the knowledge they need to earn their MDs and DOs. Learn more about how to integrate Anki flashcards into your medical school study routine.

Anki is a flashcard app—available free for computers and \$25 for a phone app—that uses spaced repetition. That is the name for a study technique in which the user is quizzed more often on the information they struggle with, and tested less often on the material that is easier or more familiar to the user. Students can use “decks” of questions that others have created at no cost, or they can create their own questions.

Anki and another spaced-repetition study aid were “associated with superior performance” for medical students who used the study method compared with those who didn’t, one study found.

Each additional 445 boards-style practice questions or 1,700 unique Anki flashcards was associated with an additional point on USMLE Step 1 when researchers controlled for other academic and psychological factors, according to the study, “Student-directed retrieval practice is a predictor of medical licensing examination performance,” published online Oct. 23, 2015, in *Perspectives on Medical Education*.

If you are new to Anki or thinking about using it, here are some tips from two medical students who use the app.

Create your own cards. Making your own Anki cards helps you retain information because you need to think critically about the topics and it helps you focus on the areas that are weaknesses for you personally, users say.

Samuel Roberts, a second-year medical student at Midwestern University Arizona College of Osteopathic Medicine, said he keeps his textbook alongside his computer as he creates and first studies Anki questions so that he can better understand what he is studying and put facts into context.

As he gets more comfortable with the information, he puts the book away and uses Anki to help him practice recalling the information.

Roberts advised students to include the source of the knowledge—a quick note about the book and page number the information came from—on the answer side of the card so they can go back to it later if they need to better understand the topic or double-check information.

Jerome Soldo, a second-year medical student at University of Louisville School of Medicine, likes to make Anki cards as he listens to lectures.

Find classmates who use Anki, too. Swapping decks with friends is a good way to boost your knowledge. Roberts and Soldo said that during their first years of medical school, classmates would share their decks before exams.

Organize the decks. Anki allows users to organize decks in whatever way they find most useful and to tag questions. Soldo and Roberts said Anki users should take advantage of that.

Soldo likes to organize his Anki cards based on a lecture or topic. For example, the broad category would be “organ system,” under that he would have “endocrinology” and under that he would have “thyroid gland.”

Tagging cards by topic allows users to easily go back, search a keyword and study the topics they need to focus on.

Use spaced repetition to its fullest. What makes Anki different from using straight flash cards is that while using Anki cards, users can tell the program how easy or hard the question was to answer. Based on that feedback, Anki will show the question more or less frequently.

By being able to spend your time on the questions that are more difficult for you instead of the ones you already know is an effective use of study time, Roberts and Soldo said.

Use it every day—not to cram. In an ideal world, Soldo tries to work through his decks every day. While that may not happen, he said the cards work best when you stay on top of them. He and Roberts said the phone app is a great way to study anywhere.

Roberts said he can take it to the gym and study cards while on the exercise bike. Soldo likes to have the phone app for those unexpected 10 minutes he finds during the day, for example, waiting for the

bus.

Take advantage of community decks. Cards take time to create, so if you can find community decks that others create and post for other to use, that's fantastic, Roberts said. Community decks on physiology and pathology, microbiology and physiology are among the most popular, according to Anki.

The website MedSchool + Anki offers further guidance on using Anki in medical school.

The AMA selected Kaplan as a preferred provider to support you in reaching your goal of passing the USMLE® or COMLEX-USA®. AMA members can save 30 percent on access to additional study resources, such as Kaplan's Qbank and High-yield courses. Learn more.