

Pre-med glossary guide

Medicine can be a career that is both challenging and highly rewarding, but figuring out a medical school's prerequisites and navigating the application process can be a challenge into itself. The AMA has the answers to frequently asked questions about medical school, the application process, the MCAT and more.

How hard is it to get into medical school?

Medicine is a highly competitive field. Medical schools receive hundreds or thousands of applications every year for a limited number of openings. All candidates are considered for their academic performance, extracurricular experiences, medical career exposure and more.

Applicants must find a way to distinguish their accomplishments from those of their peers in order to make themselves an attractive candidate.

Related resources

- Why are you pursuing a career in medicine? Interviewers will ask. (AMA)
- Ask the experts: Create a winning application (AAMC)

My GPA needs help. What is a good GPA to get into medical school?

GPA is only one metric that medical schools consider during the admissions process.

Candidates with lower GPAs may be able to mitigate an uneven academic record with strong performance on the MCAT and relevant extracurricular activities or life experience.

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- Ask the experts: Create a winning application (AAMC)

What are the best undergraduate degrees for getting into medical school?

There is no particular major that will make a student a more competitive applicant in the eyes of admissions experts.

While many applicants with a strong foundation in the sciences feel better prepared for success in the MCAT and in the medical school curriculum, some medical schools find that students with humanities or other non-medical backgrounds are often more effective at communicating with patients.

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| [Which undergrad majors are best for med school? \(AMA\)](#)

What is the process for getting into medical school?

Applying to medical school is a multistep process:

Step 1. MCAT

The Medical College Application Test (MCAT) is a four-part exam that tests applicants' problem solving and critical thinking skills and knowledge of scientific concepts and principles.

Step 2. Primary application

The AAMC's American Medical College Application Service® (AMCAS®) and the Texas Medical and Dental School Application Service (TMDSAS) are the two main primary application services for MD-granting programs in the U.S. The AMCAS application has nine sections that include candidate's background, coursework completed, extracurricular experiences, Letters of Evaluation references and

personal essays.

Step 3. Secondary application

In addition to the primary application, candidates also complete a series of secondary applications for individual medical schools that explain why they are interested in each institution.

Step 4. Interview

Applicants that a medical school are considering for admission will be asked to come for an in-person interview that will allow the school to assess how suitable a candidate is for their institution and program. It also provides an opportunity for applicants to learn more about the school.

Step 5. Background check

Because medical students care for patients, each candidate will be subject to a broad-ranging background check that will investigate personal records like social media activity, criminal records and financial history.

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| [The parts of your medical school application \(AAMC\)](#)

Should I delete my social media accounts?

Medical schools who feel you are qualified for an interview will be reviewing your online presence. Expect that public groups you are part of, images without privacy settings and posts tied to any accounts under your name will be viewable by the school.

Look critically at these to see if your online presence matches what a medical school would expect from their future graduate. Consider applying privacy settings. If your images are tagged on multiple platforms, you may want to consider deleting these accounts entirely during the application process.

Do medical schools accept community college credits or transfer credits?

The standard for judging community college credits will vary with each medical school.

Some will accept prerequisite academic work from any accredited institution, including community colleges, as long as applicants meet other necessary requirements and have completed upper level coursework at a four-year institution.

However, it may be helpful to speak with the admissions office at a medical school you're considering to find out how they interpret community college work.

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| Ask the experts: Create a winning application (AAMC)

I'm a non-traditional medical school applicant. What do I need to know?

Every medical school has a unique list of required or recommended premedical coursework and most require that students have completed coursework and other prerequisites within a certain timeframe. Most medical schools, for example, require students to provide MCAT scores that are no more than three years old.

Above all, institutions look for students whose applications and interviews demonstrate their ability to handle challenging coursework and have the qualities needed to succeed in a medical career. Applicants who are able to demonstrate a range of competencies are more likely to find success, no matter how traditional their path toward medical school has been.

There are also many pre-med post-baccalaureate programs available if you don't have the requisite coursework.

Related resources

- | Why are you pursuing a career in medicine? Interviewers will ask. (AMA)
 - | Admission requirements (AAMC)
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Can people without a pre-med major still get into medical school?

Yes! Medical schools take a holistic look at candidates. As long as all prerequisite coursework has been completed, medical schools will consider applicants of any academic background.

Related resources

- | Which undergrad majors are best for med school? (AMA)
 - | The core competencies for entering medical students (AAMC)
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How important is the MCAT to getting into medical school?

Though only one of several factors considered when applying to medical school, success on the exam shows that applicants have the problem solving, critical thinking, and knowledge of natural, behavioral, and social science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine.

Related resource

- | About the MCAT® exam (AAMC)

What does the MCAT test you on?

The MCAT tests individuals on problem solving, critical thinking and knowledge of the concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine.

The test has four sections:

- | Biological and biochemical foundations of living systems
- | Chemical and physical foundations of biological systems
- | Psychological, social and biological foundations of behavior
- | Critical analysis and reasoning skills

What is a good MCAT score?

The MCAT is graded on a curve where 500 is the average for all four sections of the exam with scores ranging from 472 to 528.

Related resource

- | [MCAT curve graphic \(JPEG, AAMC\)](#)

I'm applying to medical school but I already have a master's degree. Do I have to take the MCAT?

Yes. The Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) is a required component of admission criteria for all candidates regardless of academic achievement.

The admission process is intimidating. What are tips to prepare for medical school interviews?

1. Be ready to express why you're pursuing a career in medicine.
2. Be aware of various formats used, such as the multiple mini-interview, situational judgment testing, behavioral based interviews and others.
3. Share examples of how you've served others throughout your life.
4. Ask at least a few thoughtful, creative questions to the interviewer.
5. Convey some uniqueness about yourself to increase your memorability.
6. Stick around after the interview to explore the facility and learn even more.
7. Send a follow-up email to the interviewers, thanking them for their time and expressing your genuine interest in their program.

Related resources

- | [Why are you pursuing a career in medicine? Interviewers will ask. \(AMA\)](#)
 - | [Ask the experts: Preparing for medical school interviews \(AAMC\)](#)
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When should I start to prepare for medical school?

While there's no official right or wrong timing, many students start to prepare for medical school in

their sophomore year of undergrad and apply to an MCAT preparatory program for the summer in between sophomore and junior year. That should give you plenty of time to take practice exams before taking the MCAT.

Related resources

- | [Preparing for your MCAT? Persistence, patience can pay off \(AMA\)](#)
 - | [Ask the experts: Preparing for medical school as an undergrad \(AAMC\)](#)
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What is the best way to prepare for medical school?

1. Use an academic advisor. Many universities even have pre-health advisors.
2. Seek opportunities to shadow physicians to ensure medicine is the career for you.
3. Find courses that offer opportunities to learn in teams, since that is how health care works.
4. Join a few clubs or organizations and consider taking on a leadership role.
5. Get laboratory experience, whether it's research and/or shadowing.
6. Seek letters of recommendation from mentors who can advocate for your work and character.
7. Schedule your MCAT and devote at least several months to study for it.
8. Don't give up if you encounter academic or personal struggles along the way, as schools value evidence of resilience.

Related resources

- | [Preparing for your MCAT? Persistence, patience can pay off \(AMA\)](#)
 - | [10 things to do to prepare for applying to medical school \(AAMC\)](#)
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What are the best activities or research opportunities to become involved in?

Most medical school applicants have experience in both research and patient care. This shows the school that your interest in medicine is balanced.

Experiences during summers or gap years—such as teaching, project management or any other involvement in a team environment—that teach how to navigate challenges, personalities and negotiation will also be viewed as valuable skills for a life in medicine.

How do I evaluate medical schools? Which medical schools are the best?

Every year, several publications release rankings of the top medical schools in the nation, based on varying criteria. But applicants should dive deeper to ensure schools of interest are a good personal fit. For example, look at where graduates are placed for residency, and consider the competitiveness of specific programs and specialties. Additionally, some schools offer specialized tracks based on specific career goals, such as accelerated primary care pathways.

Related resource

| [4 questions to consider when researching medical schools \(AMA\)](#)

I was accepted to multiple medical schools. What should I consider before I choose?

Applicants should look beyond the ‘name brand’ of a school and focus on qualities that hold personal appeal. A prospective student should look for a medical school that fits their needs for learning environment, geographical location, cost, match rates, hospital rankings and more.

Length of the education period is also worth bearing in mind. As three-year medical schools are

becoming more mainstream, it's worth considering whether you would thrive in a continuous educational experience.

Related resources

- | 4 questions to consider when researching medical schools (AMA)
 - | Researching and evaluating medical schools (Kaplan)
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What if I don't get accepted into medical school?

Applicants who are not accepted by a medical school should take some time to work through their feelings and put things into context. The national average acceptance rate the past few years has been around 40%, so each year, over half of all applicants do not end up being accepted.

It may also be helpful for prospective students to review their applications and identify areas for improvement, evaluating MCAT scores, experience and other achievements. Admissions committees want to see noticeable changes in re-applicants. It can't hurt to reach out to a pre-health advisor, or a specific medical school representative, to explore how to enhance chances of acceptance the next time around.

Additionally, there are many master's programs in medical science that are affiliated with medical schools and offer the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency with a medical school curriculum. If you consider these programs, you should discuss the program's success rate at achieving medical school admissions.

Related resource

- | Reapplying to medical school? Tips from admissions officers (AAMC)
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What if I can't afford medical school?

The cost of medical school can seem overwhelming, but there are many options available that can help make payment feasible. Prospective students should start out by gathering advice from everyone they can: current medical students or residents, admissions or financial aid officers, pre-health advisors. Advisors should be able to offer plenty of insights and information about financial aid, loan repayment and loan forgiveness options that can be explored further.

Also, many schools offer scholarships based on need and/or merit. And while their number is limited, there are some tuition-free schools that are highly competitive.

Related resources

- | [What students need to know about repaying med school loans \(AMA\)](#)
 - | [You can afford medical school \(AAMC\)](#)
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What are the USMLE exams? Do I need to take them before medical school?

The USMLE consists of three separate exams that are taken throughout medical school and residency, so they're not something that a candidate needs to worry about before medical school. The exams assess how well a student can apply their skills to real life medical scenarios, and individuals must pass all three in order to obtain a license to practice medicine. The USMLE also has secondary uses, such as graduation decisions for medical schools, and promotion or ranking of applicants in residency programs.

Related resources

- | [Study tips for USMLE® or COMLEX-USA® \(AMA\)](#)
- | [What is the USMLE®? \(Kaplan\)](#)