

Is there a right time to apply to medical school?

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Ideally, you apply to medical school when your life plan dictates. But when is that? Medical school admissions faculty offered some thoughts on when prospective medical students should apply. Here's a look at what they had to say.

Wait until you're ready

You can go through the medical school application process a number of times. The first time you apply, your application will be fresh. That application also should sparkle—so don't rush it.

Beth M. Piraino, MD, is associate dean of admissions and financial aid at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine (Pitt), one of 37 member schools of the AMA's Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium.

"Your first time applying is your chance to really shine," Dr. Piraino said. "My advice is do not apply until you have all your ducks lined up. Seek advice from people who know the process."

What does it mean to be ready?

Your medical school application is a checklist of sorts. The fields you fill in—including Medical College Admissions Test score, undergraduate grade point average, shadowing experience, letters of recommendation—provide a pretty good road map of what you need to have done in advance of applying.

The demands of those requirements make it difficult to apply straight from medical school, according to Deanna Hughes. She is director of residential admissions at A.T. Still University School of Osteopathic Medicine in Arizona, which is also a member of the AMA consortium. Hughes says the

average applicant age is about 25, meaning applicants typically take one or two gap years between earning their bachelor's degree and applying to medical school.

“We are looking for a candidate who has maturity and can work well with others. Some young undergrads have that,” she said.

On either the low end or the high end, Hughes says, age isn't a factor in admissions.

“We definitely like the diversity of older students in our cohorts,” Hughes said. “They bring a different perspective to a medical school class. Age should not deter somebody from going to medical school. We see career changes quite a bit—from different health professions, education and other fields. They have to work just as hard as a younger student to get all those experiences” for their application.

In terms of getting ready, particularly for students who know they want to pursue medical education during undergrad, Hughes recommends working with a health services adviser at your undergraduate institution.

Bad results aren't end results

There are a number of reasons why you might come up empty the first time you apply to medical school. That doesn't mean you aren't cut out to be a doctor. It does mean you might have to refine your credentials.

Now a third-year medical student at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, Andy Chen faced an arduous journey before landing a strong fit at Loyola.

“There are hurdles in the journey to becoming a doctor, and the perseverance and tenacity an applicant demonstrates in overcoming a disappointing MCAT experience—or any other shortcoming in their application for that matter—will go a long way in earning an acceptance to medical school,” he said.