

COVID-19 means a shorter MCAT: What aspiring med students must know

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For aspiring medical students preparing for the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a curveball—as it has for the entire medical school admissions process.

Administrations of the exam are on hold until May 29. In response to losing more than a month of prime test-taking time, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) is making changes to the exam that will accommodate additional test times.

What are those changes, and should they alter your preparation? One expert on the exam offered his opinion.

Exam length

The single biggest change to the exam is that for the remainder of the 2020 testing cycle, it will be reduced in length. The typical MCAT test-taker is given seven hours and 30 minutes of test-taking time. Under the abridged format, the exam's seat time is five hours and 45 minutes.

All the exam's sections will feature fewer questions, and some passages will be removed. Still, the breadth of required knowledge remains the same, so it's best to stick to your initial study plan.

“The exam itself is going to be shorter,” said Petros Minasi, senior director of prehealth programs at Kaplan Test Prep. “But what hasn't changed is the proportionality in terms of the amount of time a student has per question. It isn't as though the exam has gotten harder or gotten easier. Even though it is a shorter exam, it is relatively the same difficulty as far as pacing.”

Testing times

To accommodate the need for more test takers to be able sit for the exam in a shorter window, the AAMC has moved from one administration of the exam per test day to three. The three times are 6:30 a.m., 12:15 p.m. and 6 p.m. None of those time frames include a meal break, which differs from the typical exam day schedule.

The spread on times means that students should identify their ideal time and test-taking location and register for it as soon as possible, according to Minasi.

“The main thing for a student to really be considering is not just when they are selecting their testing time, but how they are going to incorporate the ‘when’ of the exam into their overall preparation plan—not in terms of the studying of questions and content, but as far as making sure they are physically and mentally ready to test at their exam time,” Minasi said.

One recommendation Minasi offered to account for changes in exam times is to study and take practice exams during the window in which you will take the exam.

Should abridged exam alter study plans?

For the most part, Minasi said students should proceed as if they were taking the full-length MCAT exam. The one possible exception is taking practice exams. Doing that, a student should shorten the test-taking time and cut the number of questions in the exam to match the breakdown of the shortened exam.

Kaplan has suggestions on how to alter your practice exam to best fit the format you will encounter when you take it in the coming weeks.

Beyond that, “the only thing a student should be altering is the mindset that they are going to be taking a shorter exam than the full-length exam that they have been preparing for,” Minasi said. “The content topics that would normally be tested are all still fair game.”

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 in itself. The AMA premed glossary guide has the answers to frequently asked questions about medical school, the application process, the MCAT and more. Prospective applicants should also be reassured that admissions offices are acutely aware of recent disruptions to historical processes and will be making adjustments to account for the realities of the current situation.

Have peace of mind and get everything you need to start med school off strong with the AMA.