4 essential tips for your final weeks of Step 1 study

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Typically, medical students take Step 1 of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) following their pre-clinical training. For many medical students, that means their exam date is approaching. For the first time, the exam will be scored as pass-fail this testing cycle. Those changes were made with students in mind, one leading voice in medical education noted.

“Since any change—particularly any change that relates to the residency selection process—can be stressful for students, this period of transition may concern some,” said Kimberly Lomis, MD, the AMA’s vice president of undergraduate medical education innovations. “But this shift to pass-fail was primarily motivated by concerns for student well-being. The intent is to alleviate the pressure of exam prep so students can think more broadly about their preparation to be great physicians.”

For those who are approaching their exam date, what should you do to make the most of your remaining time? Here are some helpful tips.

1. **Don’t do it alone?**
   Find a motivating study partner—someone who can supplement your knowledge and hold you accountable. Set up a regular weekly session where you can review what you have learned and determine what you need to learn.

2. **Identify, focus on high-yield topics?**
   Speaking broadly, Step 1 focuses on the basic sciences. “The general wisdom is that Step 1 has a significant portion of the test on physiology, pharmacology and pathology,”
according to Christopher Cimino, MD, chief medical officer at Kaplan Medical. “And some questions will have a combo of two or all three as part of the question.”

Factor in personal wellness

At the Keck School of Medicine of the University of Southern California (USC) the school has encouraged students to not think about the exam. “Students have initiated Step 1-free zones at our school, where you are not allowed to talk about it. And the first person who does talk about it pays a dollar,” said Chantal Young, PhD, USC’s director of medical student wellness.

“Taking full days in the middle of dedicated studying, if not two full days, of rest is very important. Sometimes you need to wake up in the morning and know you’re not touching it today. Your brain needs to rest and recover just like your body does if you are preparing for an incredibly difficult athletic event.”

Quiz yourself against the most popular test-prep stumpers?

Over the years, the AMA has run dozens of example questions from Kaplan Medical. If you’re preparing for the Step 1 exam, you might want to know which questions are most often missed by test-prep takers.

We’ve compiled a list of the top 5 most-read Step 1 stumpers and if you want to further test your knowledge, check out our full index of Step 1 test-prep questions.

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