Thrive on the MCAT by following this advice

DEC 30, 2021

Brendan Murphy
Senior News Writer

The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is one of the most factored metrics in whether a student gets into medical school—though admissions offices are striving to enhance holistic admissions methods. Each year, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), more than 85,000 students take the exam.

The AMA has gathered expert advice to help you achieve your best MCAT score and boost your chances of medical school admission. That content includes a comprehensive list of MCAT stumpers, covering three of the four MCAT sections—biological and biochemical foundations of living systems; chemical and physical foundations of biological systems; and psychological, social, and biological foundations of behavior. These selections from Kaplan’s MCAT Question of the Day series can help you sharpen your skills as you prepare to begin your potential journey into medical training.

In channeling expert advice for prospective test-takers, there are many keys to succeeding on the exam that extend beyond practice questions. Here are some of the most important insights.

1. **Know what you are getting into**
   While you may have scored favorably on standardized tests such as the American College Test (ACT) and Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), the MCAT is a totally different animal.

   “It’s a year’s worth of organic chemistry, a year’s worth of general chemistry, a year’s worth of physics, a year’s worth of general biology, a semester’s worth of upper division biochemistry, and topics from introductory psychology and sociology—there’s simply a lot of content that’s coming into play, and the big mistake is students think it’s the exact same
skill,” said Petros Minasi, senior director of pre-health programs at Kaplan Test Prep.

**Persistence, timing can matter**
According to a survey of more than 15,000 matriculating first-year medical students conducted by the AAMC, about 30% took the MCAT two or more times prior to getting accepted to medical school. Andy Chen, a medical student at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, took it multiple times.

“Really take your time and wait until you are fully ready to sit for the exam,” Chen said. “Readiness can be assessed by a self-reflection of one’s mastery of the content knowledge and performance on practice questions and exams.”

**Read complex content**
Three of the MCAT’s four sections—biological and biochemical foundations of living systems; chemical and physical foundations of biological systems; and psychological, social, and biological foundations of behavior—require prior content knowledge.

A fourth section—critical analysis and reasoning skills (CARS)—is based largely on inference. CARS is specifically testing students on their ability to read a passage and answer questions based on that passage. So, it makes sense to become a better reader. One way to do that is by reading sophisticated periodicals.

**Set a study schedule**
When preparing for the MCAT, experts recommend studying between 300 and 350 hours. The hours you log are one thing; how you log them is another. One expert offered insight on how prospective medical students can build the ideal program to maximize their score on one of the most important aspects of a medical school application.

**Understand how to get bang for your buck**
In preparing for the MCAT, studying high-yield topics—those that appear most frequently in the exam’s four sections—can pay dividends.
"The mistake test-takers make is they tend to want to treat everything equally, not realizing that there is a proportions game that comes into play," said Petros Minasi, Kaplan's senior director of pre-health programs. "Pre-med students should be strategic on where they are putting their emphasis."

Take the test when you are ready

According to one expert, the right timing for when you take the MCAT has to do with two factors: when you plan to apply for medical school and when you feel you will be ready. And the latter is far more important than the former.

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 unto itself. The AMA premed glossary guide has the answers to frequently asked questions about medical school, the application process, the MCAT and more.

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