

How to check your tech ahead of virtual residency interviews

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Most medical students will approach residency interviews with the right information. During the COVID-19 pandemic, making sure your technology is functioning is more important than ever.

Preparing for a residency interview is about refining the content you plan to share with your potential peers. When it comes to virtual interviews—a reality throughout the country this year—there are practical considerations that will also require an interviewee’s attention.

A recent AMA webinar looked at the planning and troubleshooting factors residency programs and medical students should examine before they begin virtual interviews. A recording of the webinar is available (registration required).

Here’s a look at some key preparations students should consider to make sure they are technically equipped for virtual interviews.

Check your equipment

An applicant’s computer, camera and microphone or built-in audio are the most important tools for virtual interviews. They should be tested well in advance of beginning virtual interviews, and that should be done on a number of platforms given that residency programs are not all using the same videoconferencing software.

You’ll also want to test your internet bandwidth at the time you expect to do your interviews. If that happens to be a high-usage time in your household, you will want to have all other devices logged off. If you have concerns about speed, it might be wise to check in with your internet service provider before interviews begin.

On the day of your interview, clear your computer desktop and make sure no unnecessary applications are running. Also, shut off all push notifications.

One tip to help you speak more naturally--offered during the webinar by Candise Johnson, a fourth-year medical student University of Mississippi Medical Center—is to post a picture on the wall behind your webcam of someone you feel comfortable talking to, such as a parent or significant other.

Learn with the AMA how M4s can manage stress during virtual interviews.

The room where it happens

As much as you may wish you were interviewing from a tropical beach, presenters on the webinar said it's best to use a natural background during your interview. The idea behind that logic is simple, this is your time to shine, why would you take focus away from your ideas and qualifications. Ensure that your background is uncluttered and professional.

During the pandemic, the best option for a virtual interview is likely in your living space—though there are exceptions. The most important thing, according to Cheryl O'Malley, MD, is to find a place that is quiet and where the residency applicant feels at ease.

“Your most important thing is to feel the most comfortable that you can, so you can shine in the best way possible,” said Dr. O'Malley, associate dean for graduate medical education at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Phoenix, which used virtual interviews before the pandemic. “So if you feel more comfortable at home even though there's distractions, do it at home.

“I've done over 500 virtual interviews. I've had applicants do it from a library, a large classroom, their home,” she said. “It's part of what it is. Sometimes they were in a call room because they were on a clinical rotation which I found fabulous. My advice is to plan the best you can to be in the place where you will be most comfortable.”

Discover four tips to help 2021 residency applicants succeed with video interviews.

Have a back-up plan

Glitches are simply part of remote communication. So, it's best for applicants to be prepared for them.

If something goes wrong in your personal environment, the fix could be as simple as restarting a router or computer. You also want to make sure you have the most recent versions of the

videoconferencing software used.

If you are unable to do the interview through your computer and you own a tablet device, have that nearby with the videoconferencing software installed. Most programs are including a back-up plan in their invitations, so be sure to read all communications carefully. And if the worst happens, and you are unable to connect for your interview, make sure to get a contact at the residency program to whom you can reach out if technical difficulties arise.

“As programs, we all have to have grace during this time” and are unlikely to judge residency applicants harshly for technical hiccups beyond their control, Dr. O’Malley said.

The AMA has curated a selection of resources to assist residents, medical students and faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic to help manage the shifting timelines, cancellations and adjustments to testing.