

What premeds need to know about the 2021 MCAT testing cycle

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The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes to the 2020 Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) testing cycle, even resulting in temporary alterations to the exam itself. With precautions in place and potential contingency plans laid out, the 2021 cycle will begin in January. The first of three registration windows for 2021 administrations of the exam opens Nov. 10.

What will be different in the 2021 cycle? How should medical students prepare for any looming uncertainty? One expert on the MCAT offers insight on those questions.

Precautions for test-taking

In 2021, the MCAT is still being administered in-person, so there is likely to be some concern among potential test-takers about acquiring SARS-CoV-2—the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19—while taking the test.

The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), which oversees the MCAT, says more than 40,000 aspiring medical students have taken the exam since May, and reports only a few isolated instances of examinees feeling symptoms after taking the exam. The AAMC and Pearson Vue, the organization responsible for administering the MCAT, indicated in an August letter that they followed the protocol to ensure that the exam is administered in a safe environment.

The measures that test centers are following to prevent the spread of infection include requiring all test-takers to wear masks, reducing the number of test-takers at each site by 50%, maintaining six feet of distance between test-takers, and allowing examinees to wear gloves.

Changes to registration windows

When registration for the early 2021 administration of the MCAT opens Nov. 10, that date will be about a month later than when registration usually opens. It also will be one of three registration windows for 2021 exam dates. There are typically two windows for registration.

The November registration window is for exams taking place from January through March. There is a window in February for exams taking place in April–June and one in May for the last batch of exams taking place July–September.

In 2020, a shorter version of the MCAT was administered. The purpose behind that was to accommodate a backlog of testers that occurred while exams were cancelled over the spring. The exam will revert to its previous form in 2021. Unlike a typical year, however, there will be two test-taking sessions offered per exam date, one at 7:30 a.m. and the other at 3 p.m.

The amount of overall testing slots should be about what it is in a normal year. Still, Petros Minasi, senior director of pre-health programs at Kaplan, says staying on top of your registration date can help you set the rest of your MCAT prep plan.

“It’s really about students being on top of registration, so that they are able to get a spot for their preferred window,” Minasi said. It’s most important for students to have a proper plan that is right for them and not be distracted by the fact that registration is opening closer to the exam than it normally would.”

The reality of uncertainty

The pandemic caused exams to be shut down for more than a month during the spring of 2020, and there are no guarantees that this will not happen during the 2021 cycle. The AAMC has said it will follow local guidance on matters related to cancellation; it is possible that some administrations of the exam will take place in one region, where the virus is contained, and not take place in another, where it is transmitting at a higher rate.

Minasi warns students not to focus on elements that are out of their control. Instead, proceed as though your exam is taking place on the date for which you registered—until you hear otherwise. That means sticking to your study plan.

“The best advice to students is to maintain focus on your test date,” he said. “There are so many what-ifs. If a student starts to go through them in their mind, they’ll completely lose focus on the task at



hand.”

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