How to make the most of holiday time off as a medical student

DEC 14, 2020

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Whether it’s preparing for residency interviews and the steps of training that extend beyond medical school or key exams that will take place in the spring and summer months, the second half of the academic year is rigorous for medical students.

The weeks of breaks during the holidays can represent some much-needed time to rejuvenate. Even during the pandemic, they may represent a time for students to get away from campus—assuming they do so responsibly, by knowing which risks to avoid and following CDC recommendations—and focus on something other than study. For other students, breaks may represent a time to catch up.

Here’s what academic faculty members at one prestigious medical school recommend to medical students about how to best spend their holiday time off.

Should you study?

How much time you devote to your studies—if any—during winter break, may depend on where you are in your coursework and how you feel about your standing.

At Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, a member school of the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium, first-year students go on break in the middle of a course block, meaning they will complete that course upon returning from break. Other years typically go on break with their academic tasks wrapped up.

“That’s always a big conundrum” for Vanderbilt’s first-year students, said Beth Ann Yakes, MD, an associate professor of internal medicine at the Nashville medical school. “I don’t want to forget everything I’ve learned over the past six weeks, so maybe I should study over the two-week winter break. “Other students are tired,” Dr. Yakes added. “They have been doing this since mid-July and need a break. What we tell first year students is that they have had their nose to the grindstone since
mid-July. It is OK to take some time off and figure out whatever it is that you need to rest and rejuvenate but then come back ready to dive back in.”

If you are feeling behind, a combination of rest and review might be in order.

“We don’t look at students and tell them to stay as far away from hospitals and clinics as possible,” said Michael Fowler, MD, an associate professor of medicine in Vanderbilt’s diabetes division. “A lot of times they will look at their weaker areas and study them.”

Learn about eight ways to cut medical student burnout.

Try to avoid looking ahead

The second half of the academic year is going to bring key milestones from all medical students. That includes, perhaps most notably, studying for the With those exams usually coming at the end of second year, following a dedicated study period, “we actively encourage our second years not to study for Step 1 over that winter break when they are M2s,” Dr. Fowler said.

Wellness is individualized

Vanderbilt focuses on wellness throughout its four years of training. The holidays are no different.

“Even for the two-week winter break, we have conversations in small group settings about what it means to recharge,” Dr. Yakes said. “We’ve talked about things like mindfulness and reflective writing, reading outside of medicine. You can keep up your hobbies whether that [is] music or sports or art. We talk about binging on Netflix with friends and family and how that can be helpful.

“We don’t prescribe for them what it means to recharge. That’s up to students.”

Learn about four keys to maintaining personal wellness during USMLE prep.