When should you take the MCAT? It’s a key question for pre-med planning

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Brendan Murphy
Senior News Writer

Scores on the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) remain one of the major determining factors in medical school admissions. With the importance placed on that metric, taking the exam at the right time is key to your admissions prospects.

According to Petros Minasi—who has offered advice on when to take the exam to both students and advisers—the right timing 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.

“Students should never take the MCAT solely because they built out a timeline of when they want to attend medical school,” said Minasi, senior director of pre-health programs at Kaplan. “They should take it because they absolutely feel ready. Students tend to want to sometimes rush into taking the MCAT just so they can have it done. If they haven’t had a chance to prepare, it becomes a little more of an uphill battle.” Learn the six steps to designing an MCAT prep program.

Windows

In a typical year—2021 is notably atypical, with the pandemic affecting test scheduling—Minasi said that the MCAT exam is offered in three windows. When picking a testing window, you are going to want to study for four to five months and dedicate about 350 hours to study, Minasi advises.

January test dates. Minasi said this is the most common testing window for students going from undergrad directly to medical school. In that instance, you are likely to take the exam during your junior year to apply for admission 18 months out. To do this, you will need to have a less busy calendar in the fall to make room to study.
March-May test dates. The bulk of your study will be in during the spring. But if you are taking the exam in college, you may be able to fit some time in during December. If you take the exam during this window, it’s still possible to apply for medical school directly from undergrad.

June-September test dates. The final test dates are in early September, so a student could essentially spend an entire summer studying to take the exam in the early fall. This window is likely too tight to apply for medical school immediately. Most students taking the exam in this window, Minasi said, tend to apply a year after taking the exam. The advantage of this window is also that students who don’t achieve their hoped-for score can retest the following January.

Gain insight on what it takes to go directly to med school from college.

Taking the MCAT during gap years

If you plan to take a single gap year, you are likely taking the MCAT during the spring or early summer windows to apply to medical school during the fall.

Some students opt to wait until after graduation to take the exam. If you do that, you will likely be applying for medical school admission following an entire year off. One additional advantage to that approach is it gives students time to gain relevant volunteer experience.

Students who have graduated college and entered the workforce should plan on taking the MCAT a calendar year before they plan to apply, Minasi said.

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