Physician residency interview invitations: What applicants should know

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With most applications submitted, the initial portion of the residency application cycle is largely over for aspiring resident physicians, and the next step toward landing a position is the interview process.

In advance of this crucial part of residency-selection, here are some key things to know about interview invitations.

When will I get my interview invitations?

The answer is going to depend on the specialty.

According to an AMA webinar, at least six physician specialties are offering standardized interview offer dates, meaning that in those specialties the vast majority of interview offers will go out on predetermined dates. The specialties that will be using standardized interview offer dates include ophthalmology, urology, obstetrics and gynecology, general surgery, dermatology, orthopaedic surgery, and otolaryngology.

For specialties that aren’t participating in the standardized interview offer date, interview invitations can go out as soon as programs can access applications—for the 2022–2023 cycle, that’s Sept. 28.

For the bulk of invitations, the most active weeks for interview invitations are two to three weeks after programs can access applications, according to Thalamus, a platform that residency programs can use to schedule interviews. The bulk of interview invitations go out before Thanksgiving, but the process will continue into January.
How do you manage interview invitations?

Thalamus data indicates that most interview invitations do not go out on weekends or evenings, so they largely arrive during business hours. To navigate that, students may want to take some extra steps, according to Suzanne Allen, MD, vice dean for academic, rural and regional affairs at the University of Washington School of Medicine.

“The recommendation we have been giving our students is that they set up a separate email just for their residency applications and then set up alarms on their phone for when emails come into that particular email address,” Dr. Allen said. “That way they don’t feel like they constantly have to check their email, and when they do get a notification, they can wait for a moment when they are able to step away to look at the email they have received.”

The situation is further complicated by the fact that many fourth-year medical students are in the middle of crucial elective rotations.

“We know it’s important, but we do encourage students to wait for the right moment to step away. We don’t want them walking away from rounds.”

Dr. Allen added that she cannot recall a circumstance in which a student was unable to get an interview they prioritized because of a lag in invitation response time.

When it comes to securing interviews, 18 specialties also will allow for applicant program signaling.

Should you accept any interview invitation?

The answer to this will depend on your situation. If you applied to a program, you likely have a strong interest in it. Even though interviews will largely be virtual this coming year, there is still a finite amount of space on both the program and applicant side of the equation.

“We have situations where the first program a student hears back from might be their 20th choice,” Dr. Allen said. “To me those are the larger challenges students have, trying to figure out how to decide which one to accept first and which date to schedule them.”

Dr. Allen said that University of Washington tells students that 15 interviews is a good number to aim for. So, an early invitation from a school in the middle of your list—depending on how long your list is—may be one you should strongly consider accepting. There are still logistics to balance, considering that programs do tend to offer interviews on set days—Tuesdays and Thursdays, for
instance—and those slots go on a first come, first served basis.

Learn with the AMA about tips to help M4s manage the stresses of virtual residency interviews.

How many interviews is too few?

According to data from the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) the median number of interviews for Matched applicants in the 2020–2021 cycle was 14, so Dr. Allen’s number was right in line with that.

“When a student is at less than 10 interviews, we try to encourage them to think outside the box,” Dr. Allen said. “That might mean looking at other programs they hadn’t applied to at first with the goal of trying to improve their chances at matching.” Accepting too many interviews can also be an exercise in diminishing returns, and it can prevent other applicants from getting coveted interviews they may be short on.

“The likelihood that you are going to match isn’t necessarily going to improve once you get over 15 interviews,” Dr. Allen said. “From a decision-making standpoint if you go beyond 15 you are utilizing a lot more time, which students tend to lack.”

The AMA Road to Residency series helps medical students, international medicine graduates and others find their best residency match. Find articles and resources to help you ace your residency interview, put together your rank-order list, and more. The AMA is here to help you advance to the next step of your medical career.