

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) Basics

What is the MCAT?

The MCAT, a standardized test, is required or strongly recommended for admission to almost every medical school, allopathic, osteopathic, and podiatric, in the United States. There are separate standardized exams for dentistry and optometry: Dental Admission Test (DAT) and Optometry Admission Test (OAT). The exam is usually one of the main screening devices used by admissions committees; however, the importance attached to the scores varies, depending upon the professional school and on the candidate's other credentials. *Medical School Admission Requirements (MSAR)* gives some insight into policies at each allopathic school.

What science coursework is required for the MCAT?

The test may be taken any time after the student has finished (or is within a few weeks of finishing) one year of:

- Introductory Biology
- Inorganic Chemistry
- Organic Chemistry
- Introductory Physics (however, not tested on the DAT)

What are the test dates?

The computerized MCAT is offered twenty-eight times a year; paper-and-pencil tests have been discontinued. For exam dates see the MCAT web pages.

What month should I take the MCAT?

Usually it is to the student's advantage to take the MCAT early enough that scores will be available to the medical schools by late summer of the year you are applying.

In determining when to take the test, a student should consider all of the following:

- Taking the MCAT when course material is fresher is usually advantageous.
- A test taken by June of the year you are applying has the advantage of producing scores in time to use them to make a timely (June/July) submission of your AMCAS application. Knowing your scores before making your final decision to apply is helpful, though scores on practice tests can also give you an idea of how competitive your scores may be. The MCAT scores are also useful in selecting which schools to apply to.
- If you take the MCAT after you have submitted your AMCAS application, AMCAS will send the scores to schools when they become available. Do not delay submitting your AMCAS application solely because your MCAT scores will be available later in the summer. AMCAS can be submitted when you know one medical school you want to apply to. Additional schools can be designated later.
- Taking the test by June and having scores one month later allows time to re-take the test, if needed for the current application year. The test can be taken later than June, but increased competition for July & August test dates (you can only register for one test at a time) may mean those test dates have no space left at certain locations by the time you decide you want to register to re-take the exam.
- Medical schools generally do not review an application until they receive the MCAT scores. September is the latest the MCAT is offered each year. Since scores are available 30 days after the test is taken, September test scores **of the year of application may** delay the date when the application will be reviewed. Most medical schools will accept the September test scores (a few do not), but September scores may put you at a disadvantage at schools with rolling admissions.

- If you take the test in September of your application year, and, for whatever reason, do not do as well as expected, there is no opportunity to repeat the test until January of the next year. Few schools say they will consider January scores submitted by those currently applying to them.

What are the registration dates?

Registration opens about twelve weeks prior to each test. Early registration will increase the likelihood of getting your preferred test date and site. If you register 60 or more days before the exam, you are guaranteed a seat at a site within 100 miles of your requested site.

Where is the MCAT given?

The MCAT is given on computers at designated sites around the country and abroad. When you register for the test you will be given a choice of sites. See www.aamc.org/students/mcat/ for the most current list of test sites.

How do I register to take the test?

Candidates must register electronically through the AAMC's website at www.aamc.org/students/mcat/

What is the fee?

The examination fee for the 2009 testing year is \$225. See online for information regarding the fee reduction through the Fee Assistance Program (FAP).

What is the MCAT's format?

The test takes half a day. Questions are multiple choice for the Physical Sciences, Verbal Reasoning, and Biological Sciences sections. The Writing Sample section involves writing two short essays.

How is the MCAT scored?

Four section scores are reported. Scores range from 1 (low) to 15 for Physical Sciences, Verbal Reasoning, and Biological Sciences. The Writing Sample is reported on a scale from J (lowest) to T (highest). Total scores range from 3 to 45.

How are the scores reported?

All medical schools that are members of AMCAS (American Medical College Application Service) receive **released** MCAT scores automatically. Students may use the online MCAT Thx System to request to have their scores sent to non-AMCAS schools.

In addition, students have the option of requesting that scores be released to the Health Careers Program, 103 Barnes Hall. For statistical purposes, it is very helpful to the advising service to have scores released to the program. Individual scores are kept confidential and are not placed in the Health Careers Evaluation Committee file.

How often can one take the MCAT?

The answer to this question is based on the fact that the medical schools know your complete MCAT Testing History. Usually admissions officers report that if they have more than one set of scores they look at all scores. Therefore, it is not advisable to take the MCAT for practice in the way that high school students take the PSAT before the SAT. You need to prepare fully beforehand and to take the test ONCE. An individual may take the exam three times per year and may only be registered for one test at a time.

Should I retake the MCAT?

If you take the test a second time, test designers and admissions officers expect improvement because you now have “test familiarity.” In order to impress them, scores must improve substantially. The national and Cornell-specific data on MCAT repeaters is available in the Career library in *MCAT Scores*. The national data is also on the web. By looking at these materials, you can draw conclusions about the probability of improving scores. A health careers advisor can help you further explore your specific situation.

What are the oldest scores considered?

The oldest MCAT score that each school is willing to consider is listed in *Medical School Admission Requirements* in the entry for each school. Usually it is up to two or three years, but this varies.

Why is state of legal residence important?

State residence often determines the chance of being accepted to medical schools, particularly those that are state-supported institutions. Some medical schools consider the state of residence to be the one stated on the MCAT registration. Therefore, if you have a question about residence, it should be discussed with a health careers advisor before registering for the MCAT.

How should I prepare for the MCAT?

The briefing “MCAT Review Tips” is offered each year. This briefing is also available on audio in the Career Library, 103 Barnes and the web.

What materials are available for test prep?

The Association of American Medical Colleges MCAT website is an excellent resource. Practice tests, which can greatly enhance your review, can also be ordered from this website. The Career Library, 103 Barnes, also has practice tests on file for students to work with.

The Official Guide to the MCAT will help you assess your level of knowledge and how to review. This *Guide*, to be released in the spring, will also contain sample questions.

Should I take a commercial prep course?

Many students report good results studying on their own or with a study group using their textbooks, class notes, and an MCAT review manual. Several commercial firms offer MCAT review courses. The value of these courses varies depending on one’s learning style and how well the course is taught, among other factors.

Taking the MCAT: Some Pointers

Guessing

Guessing is not penalized. The score is achieved by summing the number of questions answered correctly.

Timing

This is a timed test; therefore, practice in pacing on sample tests may be helpful in learning to pace. Each question counts the same, so it is not wise to spend too much time on one question.

Cautions

Questions are not tricky, but discriminating among answers requires careful analysis. You are expected to make deductions from complex information. The answers often include examples of preconceptions, assumptions, inferences, and examples of incomplete reasoning which are decoys from the correct answer. In other words, the test measures not only knowledge but also the ability to use the knowledge given.

Techniques

Multiple choice questions will sometimes yield to the trick of eliminating the answers that are clearly wrong and then choosing the least objectionable of the remaining answers.

There probably will not be time to calculate precisely every answer, so you need to rely on inspection, on rounding off numbers for quick calculations (thus eliminating answers of the wrong order of magnitude), and on using intuition to speed up the process of arriving at an answer.

Computer format

There is a vertical split screen with the reading passage on the left and the questions on the right. Each side is independently scrollable. You are able to highlight text within the passages and scratch paper is provided. In the Writing Sample section you are able to cut and paste, but there is no spell check.

Energy crisis

The test takes half a day. You will have three, ten-minute optional breaks. Plan to have a snack during the break time. Including at least one full test simulation within your review and practice schedule will give you insight into the energy needed and enable you to plan and pace yourself during the actual test.

Other items

- Dress in layers and plan to bring a sweater or sweatshirt, as temperatures in testing rooms will vary.
- Photos taken the day of the MCAT are transmitted to medical schools.
- Some students suggest having a headache remedy available.

Test anxiety and test confidence

- EARS (Empathy, Assistance, and Referral Service): 255-3277, 211 Willard Straight Hall.
- Center for Learning and Teaching. Individual counseling: 255-6310, Computing and Communications Center, 4th floor. 8:30-4:30, Mon-Fri.