Successfully Planning for the USMLE Step 1 and 2 CK
As a medical student, you are constantly striving to fulfill your dream of becoming a physician. The USMLE Step 1 and Step 2 CK exams are the first two exams in a three-step examination that is required for medical licensure in the United States. The USMLE exams test an aspiring physician’s ability to understand basic pathophysiologic concepts, and how they apply this knowledge towards treating patients in a safe and effective way.

Whether you are preparing for Step 1 or Step 2 CK, you have a long road ahead. Both of these exams cover a tremendous amount of material, which may feel a bit daunting. In addition to the challenge of preparing for these exams, your results will play an important role in residency selection and may impact your ability to enter a certain specialty or match in a desirable geographical location.

Both of these exams take an entire day to complete.
Step 1 is an eight-hour test that is divided into seven blocks of 40 questions. You have one hour to complete each block. This exam covers a wide range of material including, but not limited to, biochemistry, immunology, infectious diseases, pathology, physiology, pharmacology, and diseases of the major organ systems.

Although Step 1 typically receives the most attention, Step 2 CK has begun to play a larger role in the selection process, as matching into residencies has become more competitive. Step 2 CK is a nine-hour test divided into eight blocks of 40 questions, and you have one hour to complete each block. This exam tests your knowledge about the clinical sciences, including surgery, internal medicine, neurology, psychiatry, obstetrics and gynecology, and pediatrics.

Both of these exams require several months of dedicated preparation, a strong work ethic, and perseverance. We understand that you might feel overwhelmed or intimidated, which is why we’ve assembled this guide to help you create a comprehensive study plan for these exams.
Whether you realize it or not, you have been preparing for the USMLE exams throughout medical school. Your pre-clinical years have been preparing you for Step 1, and your core clinical clerkships and shelf exams have been preparing you for Step 2 CK. Excelling and working hard during these years will position you to do well on the USMLE exams.

The best first step in preparing for these exams is to plan far ahead. Thinking about these exams 4 to 6 months before your scheduled exam date will ensure that you have enough time to identify appropriate resources, create a daily schedule that works for you, and cover all the material you will need to review prior to your exam.

Selecting Resources – Less is More

A common misconception is that using more resources equates to a higher score on the exam. One pitfall of utilizing too many resources is that you tend to dabble in each resource rather than focusing on comprehensively learning all of the material in a handful of high-yield resources. It is important to select two or three high-quality resources and focus all of your attention on the material within these. Your study schedule should include enough time to thoroughly and completely review all of your selected resources.
First, select a resource to be your “overview book.” Although there are a few options for Step 1, the majority of people agree that this book should be First Aid.

First Aid has compiled the highest yield facts believed to be tested by Step 1 and is written by students who have seen recent questions. First Aid is a huge book filled with content sprawled over 600+ pages. First Aid provides a long list of details and concepts that may be tested on the exam. However, the book itself is short on explanations of concepts, and requires the reader to utilize outside resources (such as lecture slides, a textbook or Wikipedia) for further explanation.

It should take you at least 30 minutes to learn and review a single page in First Aid. Make sure to plan accordingly and dedicate several months to thoroughly review the book. It is almost impossible to learn all the information in this book if you start reading it one or two months before you take the test. When creating a study plan, remember that the content is too vast for you to be able to process it in just 4-5 weeks of free/dedicated study time. Plan to start reviewing First Aid and making flashcards, Anki decks, and notes at least two or three months before your dedicated study time.
Do not underestimate any details presented in First Aid. Even the most minute detail can come up in the form of a question on the test. Even after reading the book multiple times, you may find details that you had missed before. It is imperative to read the small italicized font (that you thought wasn’t important), the captions on the images, and the labels of any diagrams. Although you might find some sections of First Aid less interesting or “easier,” do NOT skip any of them. You should aim to have everything in First Aid memorized, to the best of your ability.

For Step 2 CK, there is less consensus regarding an overview book. However, Step Up to Medicine and Master the Boards are commonly used textbooks that provide an adequate overview of all of the material tested on the exam.
Since the USMLE exams are multiple choice exams, it is important to practice applying your knowledge by utilizing question banks, or QBanks. Commonly used QBanks include USMLE Rx, UWorld, and Kaplan. Make sure that you choose a question bank that gives detailed explanations about why an answer is correct and the others are incorrect.

Practice tests (e.g., UWorld, Kaplan, NBME) are another key strategy to assess your progress, identify weak subjects, provide additional questions for learning, and simulate the test day. However, try not to stress about a low score on a practice test, especially if you are taking it early on. Similarly, do not let a good score prevent you from studying hard. Although these scores can help give you an idea of where you are currently performing, these scores may not always represent your true performance on exam day. A research study demonstrated that the number of questions finished directly correlated with students’ Step performance, so make sure not to neglect any questions.
Since microbiology is largely memorization, create a strategy to regularly revisit this material throughout your study period to make sure that this knowledge stays fresh in your mind. Although this applies more to Step 1 than to Step 2 CK, there are still a handful of high-yield facts to know about microbiology for Step 2 CK. (Plus, learning it well for Step 1 will help you for Step 2 CK.)

An easy way to ensure regular review of this material is to utilize flow sheets, flash cards, or sketchy microbiology. It will be important to schedule about one hour of microbiology review daily.
Pharmacology

Similar to microbiology, pharmacology is largely memorization and will require daily review using flow sheets, flash cards, or sketchy pharmacology. It will also be important to schedule about one hour of pharmacology review daily.
For Step 1, Pathoma is a fantastic resource for learning pathology and histology. Pathoma is full of high-yield facts and concepts and it is important to approach memorizing in this book the same way you would approach First Aid. It is a much shorter textbook and has corresponding videos. Students often find the videos to be more engaging than the book and offer a nice break from reading. Incorporate these details into your personalized resource.

Doctors in Training and Boards and Beyond are also strong resources, although they rehash similar material as First Aid. Students often find these two resources useful in providing additional videos to help understand challenging concepts.

For Step 2 CK, OnlineMedEd is a priceless resource. OnlineMedEd provides lessons on clinical sciences by offering notes, engaging videos, and question banks for all high-yield clinical subjects. This resource is largely recognized by students as being indispensable for Step 2 CK preparation. Plan to watch and take notes on all videos during your corresponding third-year clerkship. You will use these notes to study for Step 2 CK during your dedicated study period.
Although everyone’s schedule will look different, below is an example of what a schedule might look like:

- **6-7AM**: Wake up and have breakfast
- **7-10AM**: Review new material
- **10AM-12PM**: Two blocks of Qbank
- **12-1PM**: Lunch and personal time
- **1-6PM**: Review blocks of Qbank and review material from Qbank questions
- **6-7PM**: Dinner
- **7-10PM**: Review small details, microbiology, and pharmacology
It is important to schedule “personal time.” This personal time will be time spent doing things that you enjoy. Although this would likely be different for each person, some common activities include: physical fitness, watching television and movies, cooking, hiking, playing video games, or spending with friends or family. It is also reasonable to take an entire day, or at least a half a day, completely off every week.

Be sure to incorporate this time into your daily schedule. Investing time in your physical, mental, and emotional health will pay off in the long run. Studying for 12-16 hours every day for several months is incredibly challenging and you want to ensure that you are taking care of yourself and avoiding burnout.
The MedSchoolCoach USMLE Advantage

The Best Tutors

Our tutors have been in your shoes and they recognize the enormous challenge of preparing to take the most important set of exams of your life. In addition to having taken these exams very recently, all of our tutors have excelled on the exams and scored in the top percentiles. Not only do they know the material well, but they are also intimately familiar with resources, study strategies, and how to best prepare for these exams. However, having high scores on these exams is not our only selection criteria for becoming a MedSchoolCoach tutor. All of our tutors are excellent communicators and are driven and passionate educators with years of teaching experience.

A Personalized Experience

We recognize that every student is unique, and our tutors focus specifically on your needs. Our tutors do not use a generic rubric, they tailor their tutoring and exam planning specifically to you, so that you get the best and most individualized help possible. Our tutors’ number one goal is your success.

Comprehensive Support

All of our tutors are experienced in selecting resources, creating study plans, content review, test-taking approaches, and much more. They are able to provide comprehensive support and can guide you from the beginning of your study period all the way up to the day of your exam, and beyond. Students who have received tutoring for Step 1 with MedSchoolCoach often return for help with shelf exams and Step 2 CK preparation.
Stop at Perfection

We know that a great test score requires the proper strategy, schedule, game plan, and coaching. That’s why we will work with you every step of your USMLE planning to boost your odds of acing the boards.

Proven Results

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of our customers found MedSchoolCoach “very helpful” or “extremely helpful” in the application process

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