

► INTRODUCTION

Relax.

This section is intended to make your exam preparation easier, not harder. Our goal is to reduce your level of anxiety and help you make the most of your efforts by helping you understand more about the United States Medical Licensing Examination, Step 1 (USMLE Step 1). As a medical student, you are no doubt familiar with taking standardized examinations and quickly absorbing large amounts of material. When you first confront the USMLE Step 1, however, you may find it all too easy to become sidetracked from your goal of studying with maximal effectiveness. Common mistakes that students make when studying for Step 1 include the following:

- Starting to study (including *First Aid*) too late
- Starting to study intensely too early and burning out
- Starting to prepare for boards before creating a knowledge foundation
- Using inefficient or inappropriate study methods
- Buying the wrong resources or buying too many resources
- Not using question banks early in examination preparation
- Not using practice examinations to maximum benefit
- Not understanding how scoring is performed or what the result means
- Not using review books along with your classes
- Not analyzing and improving your test-taking strategies
- Getting bogged down by reviewing difficult topics excessively
- Studying material that is rarely tested on the USMLE Step 1
- Failing to master certain high-yield subjects owing to overconfidence
- Using *First Aid* as your sole study resource
- Trying to prepare for it all alone

In this section, we offer advice to help you avoid these pitfalls and be more productive in your studies.

► USMLE STEP 1—THE BASICS

► The test at a glance:

- 8-hour exam
- Up to a total of 280 multiple choice items
- 7 test blocks (60 min/block)
- Up to 40 test items per block
- 45 minutes of break time, plus another 15 if you skip the tutorial

The USMLE Step 1 is the first of three examinations that you would normally pass in order to become a licensed physician in the United States. The USMLE is a joint endeavor of the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) and the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB). The USMLE serves as the single examination system domestically and internationally for those seeking medical licensure in the United States.

The Step 1 exam includes test items that can be grouped by the organizational constructs outlined in Table 1 (in order of tested frequency). In late 2020, the USMLE increased the number of items assessing communication skills. While pharmacology is still tested, they are focusing on drug mechanisms rather than on pharmacotherapy. You will not be required to identify the specific medications indicated for a specific condition. Instead, you will be asked more about drug mechanisms and side effects.

TABLE 1. Frequency of Various Constructs Tested on the USMLE Step 1.*

Competency	Range, %	System	Range, %
Medical knowledge: applying foundational science concepts	60–70	Reproductive & endocrine systems	12–16
Patient care: diagnosis	20–25	Respiratory & renal/urinary systems	11–15
Communication and interpersonal skills	6–9	Behavioral health & nervous systems/special senses	10–14
Practice-based learning & improvement	4–6	Blood & lymphoreticular/immune systems	9–13
Discipline	Range, %	Multisystem processes & disorders	8–12
Pathology	44–52	Musculoskeletal, skin & subcutaneous tissue	8–12
Physiology	25–35	Cardiovascular system	7–11
Pharmacology	15–22	Gastrointestinal system	6–10
Biochemistry & nutrition	14–24	Social sciences: communication & interpersonal skills	6–9
Microbiology	10–15	Biostatistics & epidemiology/population health	4–6
Immunology	6–11	Human development	1–3
Gross anatomy & embryology	11–15		
Histology & cell biology	8–13		
Behavioral sciences	8–13		
Genetics	5–9		

*Percentages are subject to change at any time. www.usmle.org

How Is the Computer-Based Test (CBT) Structured?

The CBT Step 1 exam consists of one “optional” tutorial/simulation block and seven “real” question blocks of up to 40 questions per block with no more than 280 questions in total, timed at 60 minutes per block. A short 11-question survey follows the last question block. The computer begins the survey with a prompt to proceed to the next block of questions.

Once an examinee finishes a particular question block on the CBT, he or she must click on a screen icon to continue to the next block. Examinees **cannot** go back and change their answers to questions from any previously completed block. However, changing answers is allowed **within** a block of questions as long as the block has not been ended and if time permits.

What Is the CBT Like?

Given the unique environment of the CBT, it’s important that you become familiar ahead of time with what your test-day conditions will be like. You can access a 15-minute tutorial and practice blocks at <http://orientation.nbme.org/Launch/USMLE/STPF1>. This tutorial interface is the same as the one you will use in the exam; learn it now and you can skip taking it during the exam, giving you up to 15 extra minutes of break time. You can gain experience with the CBT format by taking the 120 practice questions (3 blocks with 40 questions each) available online for free (<https://www.usmle.org/prepare-your-exam>) or by signing up for a practice session at a test center for a fee. The practice session is available for \$75 (\$155 if taken outside of the US and Canada) and is divided into a short tutorial and three 1-hour blocks of ~40 test items each.

► You can take a shortened CBT practice test at a Prometric center.

For security reasons, examinees are not allowed to bring any personal electronic equipment into the testing area. This includes both digital and analog watches, cell phones, tablets, and calculators. Examinees are also prohibited from carrying in their books, notes, pens/pencils, and scratch paper (laminated note boards and fine-tip dry erase pens will be provided for use within the testing area). Food and beverages are also prohibited in the testing area. The testing centers are monitored by audio and video surveillance equipment. However, most testing centers allot each examinee a small locker outside the testing area in which he or she can store snacks, beverages, and personal items.

► **Keyboard shortcuts:**

- A, B, etc—letter choices
- Esc—exit pop-up Calculator and Notes windows

► **Heart sounds are tested via media questions.**
Make sure you know how different heart diseases sound on auscultation.

► **Be sure to test your headphones during the tutorial.**

► **Familiarize yourself with the commonly tested lab values (eg, Hb, WBC, Ca^{2+} , Na^+ , K^+).**

► **Illustrations on the test include:**

- Gross specimen photos
- Histology slides
- Medical imaging (eg, x-ray, CT, MRI)
- Electron micrographs
- Line drawings

Questions are typically presented in multiple choice format, with 4 or more possible answer options. There is a countdown timer on the lower left corner of the screen as well. There is also a button that allows the examinee to mark a question for review. If a given question happens to be longer than the screen, a scroll bar will appear on the right, allowing the examinee to see the rest of the question. Regardless of whether the examinee clicks on an answer choice or leaves it blank, he or she must click the “Next” button to advance to the next question.

The USMLE features a small number of media clips in the form of audio and/or video. There may even be a question with a multimedia heart sound simulation. In these questions, a digital image of a torso appears on the screen, and the examinee directs a digital stethoscope to various auscultation points to listen for heart and breath sounds. The USMLE orientation materials include several practice questions in these formats. During the exam tutorial, examinees are given an opportunity to ensure that both the audio headphones and the volume are functioning properly. If you are already familiar with the tutorial and planning on skipping it, first skip ahead to the section where you can test your headphones. After you are sure the headphones are working properly, proceed to the exam.

The examinee can call up a window displaying normal laboratory values. In order to do so, he or she must click the “Lab” icon on the top part of the screen. Afterward, the examinee will have the option to choose between “Blood,” “Cerebrospinal,” “Hematologic,” or “Sweat and Urine.” The normal values screen may obscure the question if it is expanded. The examinee may have to scroll down to search for the needed lab values. You might want to memorize some common lab values so you spend less time on questions that require you to analyze these.

The CBT interface provides a running list of questions on the left part of the screen at all times. The software also permits examinees to highlight or cross out information by using their mouse. There is a “Notes” icon on the top part of the screen that allows students to write notes to themselves for review at a later time. Finally, the USMLE has recently added new functionality including text magnification and reverse color (white text on black background). Being familiar with these features can save time and may help you better view and organize the information you need to answer a question.

For those who feel they might benefit, the USMLE offers an opportunity to take a simulated test, or “CBT Practice Session” at a Prometric center. Students are eligible to register for this three-and-one-half-hour practice session after they have received their scheduling permit.

You may register for a practice session online at www.usmle.org. A separate scheduling permit is issued for the practice session. Students should allow two weeks for receipt of this permit.

How Do I Register to Take the Exam?

Prometric test centers offer Step 1 on a year-round basis, except for the first two weeks in January and major holidays. Check with the test center you want to use before making your exam plans.

US students can apply to take Step 1 at the NBME website. This application allows you to select one of 12 overlapping three-month blocks in which to be tested (eg, April–May–June, June–July–August). Choose your three-month eligibility period wisely. If you need to reschedule outside your initial three-month period, you can request a one-time extension of eligibility for the next contiguous three-month period, and pay a rescheduling fee. The application also includes a photo ID form that must be certified by an official at your medical school to verify your enrollment. After the NBME processes your application, it will send you a scheduling permit.

The scheduling permit you receive from the NBME will contain your USMLE identification number, the eligibility period in which you may take the exam, and two additional numbers. The first of these is known as your “scheduling number.” You must have this number in order to make your exam appointment with Prometric. The second number is known as the “candidate identification number,” or CIN. Examinees must enter their CINs at the Prometric workstation in order to access their exams. However, you will not be allowed to bring your permit into the exam and will be asked to copy your CIN onto your scratch paper. Prometric has no access to the codes. **Make sure to bring a paper or electronic copy of your permit with you to the exam!** Also bring an unexpired, government-issued photo ID that includes your signature (such as a driver’s license or passport). Make sure the name on your photo ID exactly matches the name that appears on your scheduling permit.

Once you receive your scheduling permit, you may access the Prometric website or call Prometric’s toll-free number to arrange a time to take the exam. You may contact Prometric two weeks before the test date if you want to confirm identification requirements. Be aware that your exam may be canceled because of circumstances related to COVID-19 or other unforeseen events. If that were to happen, you should receive an email from Prometric containing notice of the cancellation and instructions on rescheduling.

► The Prometric website will display a calendar with open test dates.

► Be familiar with Prometric’s policies for cancellation and rescheduling due to COVID-19.

► Test scheduling is done on a “first-come, first-served” basis. It’s important to schedule an exam date as soon as you receive your scheduling permit.

Although requests for taking the exam may be completed more than six months before the test date, examinees will not receive their scheduling permits earlier than six months before the eligibility period. The eligibility period is the three-month period you have chosen to take the exam. Most US medical students attending a school which uses the two-year preclerkship curriculum choose the April–June or June–August period. Most US medical students attending a school which uses the 18-month preclerkship curriculum choose the December–February or January–March period.

What If I Need to Reschedule the Exam?

You can change your test date and/or center by contacting Prometric at 1-800-MED-EXAM (1-800-633-3926) or www.prometric.com. Make sure to have your CIN when rescheduling. If you are rescheduling by phone, you must speak with a Prometric representative; leaving a voicemail message will not suffice. To avoid a rescheduling fee, you will need to request a change at least 46 calendar days before your appointment. Please note that your rescheduled test date must fall within your assigned three-month eligibility period.

► Register six months in advance for seating and scheduling preference.

When Should I Register for the Exam?

You should plan to register as far in advance as possible ahead of your desired test date (eg, six months), but, depending on your particular test center, new dates and times may open closer to the date. Scheduling early will guarantee that you will get either your test center of choice or one within a 50-mile radius of your first choice. For most US medical students, the desired testing window correlates with the end of the preclerkship curriculum, which is around June for schools on a two-year preclerkship schedule, and around January for schools on an 18-month schedule. Thus US medical students should plan to register before January in anticipation of a June test date, or before August in anticipation of a January test date. The timing of the exam is more flexible for IMGs, as it is related only to when they finish exam preparation. Talk with upperclassmen who have already taken the test so you have real-life experience from students who went through a similar curriculum, then formulate your own strategy.

Where Can I Take the Exam?

Your testing location is arranged with Prometric when you book your test date (after you receive your scheduling permit). For a list of Prometric locations nearest you, visit www.prometric.com.

How Long Will I Have to Wait Before I Get My Result?

The USMLE reports results in three to four weeks, unless there are delays in processing. Examinees will be notified via email when their results are available. By following the online instructions, examinees will be able

to view, download, and print their exam report online for ~365 days after notification, after which results can only be obtained through requesting an official USMLE transcript. Additional information about results reporting timetables and accessibility is available on the official USMLE website. Between 2021 and 2022, Step 1 pass rates dropped from 95% to 91% across US/Canadian schools and from 77% to 71% across non-US/Canadian schools (see Table 2), following the transition to pass/fail scoring in January 2022.

What About Time?

Time is of special interest on the CBT exam. Here's a breakdown of the exam schedule:

15 minutes	Tutorial (skip if familiar with test format and features)
7 hours	Seven 60-minute question blocks
45 minutes	Break time (includes time for lunch)

The computer will keep track of how much time has elapsed on the exam. However, the computer will show you only how much time you have remaining in a given block. Therefore, it is up to you to determine if you are pacing yourself properly (at a rate of approximately one question per 90 seconds).

The computer does not warn you if you are spending more than your allotted time for a break. You should therefore budget your time so that you can take a short break when you need one and have time to eat. You must be especially careful not to spend too much time in between blocks (you should keep track of how much time elapses from the time you finish a block of questions to the time you start the next block). After you finish one question block, you'll need to click to proceed to the next block of questions. If you do not click within 30 seconds, you will automatically be entered into a break period.

Break time for the day is 45 minutes, but you are not required to use all of it, nor are you required to use any of it. You can gain extra break time (but not extra time for the question blocks) by skipping the tutorial or by finishing a block ahead of the allotted time. Any time remaining on the clock when you finish a block gets added to your remaining break time. Once a new question block has been started, you may not take a break until you have reached the end of that block. If you do so, this will be recorded as an "unauthorized break" and will be reported on your final exam report.

Finally, be aware that it may take a few minutes of your break time to "check out" of the secure resting room and then "check in" again to resume testing, so plan accordingly. The "check-in" process may include fingerprints, pocket checks, and metal detector scanning. Some students recommend pocketless clothing on exam day to streamline the process.

► Step 1 pass rates dropped significantly amongst both US/Canadian students and IMGs in 2022.

► Gain extra break time by skipping the tutorial, or utilize the tutorial time to add personal notes to your scratch paper.

► Be careful to watch the clock on your break time.

If I Freak Out and Leave, What Happens to My Exam?

Your scheduling permit shows a CIN that you will need to enter to start your exam. Entering the CIN is the same as breaking the seal on a test book, and you are considered to have started the exam when you do so. However, no result will be reported if you do not complete the exam. If you leave at any time after starting the test, or do not open every block of your test, your test will not be scored and will be reported as incomplete. Incomplete results count toward the maximum of four attempts for each Step exam. Although a pass or fail result is not posted for incomplete tests, examinees may still be offered an option to request that their scores be calculated and reported if they desire; unanswered questions will be scored as incorrect.

The exam ends when all question blocks have been completed or when their time has expired. As you leave the testing center, you will receive a printed test-completion notice to document your completion of the exam. To receive an official score, you must finish the entire exam.

What Types of Questions Are Asked?

► Nearly three fourths of Step 1 questions begin with a description of a patient.

All questions on the exam are **one-best-answer multiple choice items**. Most questions consist of a clinical scenario or a direct question followed by a list of four or more options. You are required to select the single best answer among the options given. There are no “except,” “not,” or matching questions on the exam. A number of options may be partially correct, in which case you must select the option that best answers the question or completes the statement. Additionally, keep in mind that certain questions in the exam are experimental, but you won’t know which ones, and they won’t impact your final score.

TABLE 2. Passing Rates for the 2022-2023 USMLE Step 1.²

	2022		2023	
	No. Tested	% Passing	No. Tested	% Passing
Allopathic 1st takers	22,828	93%	23,100	92%
Repeaters	1,489	71%	2,046	70%
Allopathic total	24,317	91%	25,146	9%
Osteopathic 1st takers	4,659	89%	4,913	87%
Repeaters	63	67%	115	60%
Osteopathic total	4,722	89%	4,913	86%
Total US/Canadian	29,039	91%	30,059	90%
IMG 1st takers	22,030	74%	22,611	72%
Repeaters	2,926	45%	3,530	47%
IMG total	24,956	71%	26,141	68%
Total Step 1 examinees	53,995	82%	56,200	80%

How Is the Test Scored?

The USMLE transitioned to a pass/fail scoring system for Step 1 on January 26, 2022. Examinees now receive an electronic report that will display the outcome of either “Pass” or “Fail.” Failing reports include a graphic depiction of the distance between the examinee’s score and the minimum passing standard as well as content area feedback. Feedback for the content area shows the examinee’s performance relative to examinees with a low pass (lower, same, or higher) and should be used to guide future study plans. Passing exam reports only displays the outcome of “Pass,” along with a breakdown of topics covered on that individual examination (which will closely mirror the frequencies listed in Table 1).

Examinees who took the test before the transition to pass/fail reporting received an electronic report that includes the examinee’s pass/fail status, a three-digit test score, a bar chart comparing the examinee’s performance in each content area with their overall Step 1 performance, and a graphic depiction of the examinee’s performance by physician task, discipline, and organ system. Changes will not be made to transcripts containing three-digit test scores.

The USMLE does not report the minimum number of correct responses needed to pass, but estimates that it is approximately 60%. The USMLE may update exam result reporting in the future, so please check the USMLE website or www.firstaidteam.com for updates.

► Depending on the resource used, practice questions may be easier than the actual exam.

Official NBME/USMLE Resources

The NBME offers a Comprehensive Basic Science Examination (CBSE) for practice that is a shorter version of the Step 1. The CBSE contains four blocks of 50 questions each and covers material that is typically learned during the basic science years. CBSE scores represent the percent of content mastered and show an estimated probability of passing Step 1. Many schools use this test to gauge whether a student is expected to pass Step 1. If this test is offered by your school, it is usually conducted at the end of regular didactic time before any dedicated Step 1 preparation. If you do not encounter the CBSE before your dedicated study time, you need not worry about taking it. Use the information to help set realistic goals and timetables for your success.

The NBME also offers six forms of Comprehensive Basic Science Self-Assessment (CBSSA). Students who prepared for the exam using this web-based tool reported that they found the format and content highly indicative of questions tested on the actual exam. In addition, the CBSSA is a fair predictor of historical USMLE performance. The test interface, however, does not match the actual USMLE test interface, so practicing with these forms alone is not advised.

The CBSSA exists in two formats: standard-paced and self-paced, both of which consist of four sections of 50 questions each (for a total of 200 multiple choice items). The standard-paced format allows the user up to 75 minutes