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USMLE Step 1 Prep Overview

Select the ideas that best fit your learning style and lifestyle.

Planning Your Time

- How many days do you have to study? How much time per day can you realistically devote to studying?
- Leave 2-3 days at the end of your study period for catch-up and review. You may want to consider a similar idea for each week: Plan a block of time at the end of each week for catch up and review.
- Think about what type of studying you do best at certain times and plan your schedule accordingly. For example, think about what times of day it is best for you to read heavier material, do practice questions, run flashcards, write out outlines, etc.
- Plan days that have a combination of subjects that are harder/easier, as well as days that have a combination of reading review books, doing questions, preparing outlines/diagrams for future study, etc.
- For the first week of studying, consider planning days that differ from each other in terms of what your schedule looks like. For example, one day might have you doing practice questions in the morning and reviewing the answers in the afternoon, and the next day might have you reviewing a tough subject in the morning and doing practice questions in the afternoon. Take note of which schedules suit you best, and decide whether you will settle on one type of schedule or continue with the variety.
- Schedule in cushions, such as a long lunch that you can cut down if you feel you need to sleep later that day.
- If you start to experience burnout (nothing seems to stick at all, feelings of anger, hopelessness) take a whole day off to do something fun and/or all about you. Plan a few of these days into your schedule ahead of time, but try to use them only if absolutely necessary. Decide ahead of time what the requirements will be for using a burnout day.
 - Keep in mind that burnout often happens around weeks 3-5. Be prepared for how you might energize yourself during this time.
- Think about how you want to take time off. For example, would you rather have one full day off or two half-days or evenings off?
- Don't forget to plan in maintenance activities, such as shopping, doing laundry, etc.

What To Study and When?

- Write out a list of the subjects that are covered. Rank how well you know each subject, perhaps on a scale of 1-3. Based on those rankings, decide how many blocks of time you need to spend on each subject.
- If you want both accountability and flexibility, consider using a spreadsheet to plan how much total time you need to spend on each subject and keep track of how much you have used already. For example, if you have 6 weeks of 6 days per week, with 3 blocks of 3 hour periods, you have 108 total blocks of studying. Decide how you will allocate each of those 108 blocks and keep track on your spreadsheet of the subject, how many blocks you have allotted, how many you have used, and how many you have left. This method gives you flexibility to study what you are in the mood for that day, but reminds you that you need to get in a certain amount of studying for every subject eventually.
- Take a practice exam (full exam or random questions from question bank) at the beginning of each week and let the results help determine what your focus will be that week.

How To Spend Your Time

- A combination is best, but figure out if your learning style is more question-heavy or reading-heavy, and plan accordingly.
- Consider the sandwich method: Look over some questions, review the material, then do more questions. If you feel you learn better from reading, then reverse the sandwich.
- Run flashcards as a break when reading or doing questions feels less productive.

Using Practice Tests

- Most Stanford students take between 4-7 practice NBME exams (4 hours each).
- Take at least one practice test per week/two week period to get an idea of your progress and help you plan your studying for the following week.
- Keep track of questions that you narrowed down to two answers and picked one, no matter whether you got the question right or wrong. Review why one answer was correct and the other was not.
- In addition to using practice tests for content, use them to understand and keep track of when you need to take a break, when you need caffeine, food, etc.
- Aim for 60%-70% correct

Logistics of Studying

- Think about where you will study. Do you need to be in a classroom/study room, library, coffee shop, etc.? Does varying where you study help, or is consistency better for you?

- Consider finding 1-2 study buddies to help keep each other accountable. You may not actually study the same thing at the same time, but making plans to meet at a certain time and stay until a certain time may help. Make rules for the study group, such as only talking to each other every hour on the hour to report progress or ask questions.

Lifestyle

- Build daily exercise into your schedule, even if it is just a short walk. Think about what time it is best for you to exercise – is a morning workout a good way to jumpstart your day, is a midday workout best for breaking up the studying, or is an evening workout needed to wake you up for a few more hours of work? Also consider whether you want your exercise time to be a true break (meaning no studying) or a time to multi-task (e.g. run flashcards or listen to lectures while doing cardio).
- Include nutrition in your planning. What do you need to eat and drink/what do you need to avoid and when in order to be at your best? Plan shopping and food preparation time into your schedule.
- Get fresh air and sunlight every day, even if just for a few minutes.
- Let the people in your life know ahead of time what you need from them. Think about what would be supportive and what would be stressful (e.g. “Please don’t ask me how it is going, but feel free to drop off chocolate chip cookies if you want to let me know you’re thinking of me.”). Tell them when they can expect to hear from you (e.g. only a text in the evenings or phone calls on weekends).
- Put social interactions into your schedule so you can enjoy them without feeling guilty.

Other Tips

- Select one review book, such as First Aid, as your base. Annotate review book with more detailed information as you come across it in other sources.
- Use First Aid as your base. Go to a copy store and have the binding cut off and holes punched so you can put it in a large binder. Add in other related pages (e.g. helpful diagrams or charts, outlines of your own notes) in each section so all of your information is in one place.
- Start with subject-specific question blocks at the beginning of your study period, then transition to mixed questions as you get closer to the exam.
- If you are still in classes, follow along in your class using First Aid. Annotate and organize information in a way that will help you study it later on.
- As you study, distinguish between factoids and knowledge that has multiple discipline connections that are worth more time and effort.
- Write down very brief explanations for questions you get wrong. Randomly review a few of these explanations every day.
- Create your own condensed summaries of key material for review right before the test.

- As you finish a subject, create a Question Bank exam with 50 items from each subject you have completed up to that point. By the end of the study period, you will be taking long practice tests under conditions that cover all of your completed subject areas.
- Try not to worry about what others are doing (yes, this is difficult!). Plan what works for you and stick to it. There is a difference between looking to others for good study tips and judging yourself harshly by where others seem to be – the latter will only stress you out and interfere with your learning.
- Spaced repetition is best for large quantities of rote memorization (e.g. pharm). Use cards or the pharm listings at the end of each system in First Aid. Focus on mechanisms, interactions, and adverse effects/toxicities.
- Keep a notebook or document where you list topics that you need more time on. This practice will allow you to keep moving and stay on schedule. Plan time at the end of each day or end of each week to review these concepts.
- Try doing questions backwards, Jeopardy!-style. For example, look at each answer choice and think of the question that would make that answer choice correct.

The Week Before the Exam

- Review content areas that require more rote memorization.
- Take more mixed subject Question Bank exams or other comprehensive practice exams.
- Review subjects where you feel you have more familiarity (“Oh, right, I recognize that”) than recall (“I can state the answer without looking.”).
- If you have been studying late at night and sleeping late, start getting yourself on the right time schedule for going to bed and getting up early to take the exam. Go to sleep and get up at the same time every day, and do not take naps. Try to include getting at least 6-7 hours of sleep or more.
- If you haven’t done so already, visit where you will take the exam. Try to go at the same time you need to get there for the exam so you understand how to get there and what traffic will be like.
- Make sure you know what your break schedule for the day of the exam will be.
- Review the tutorial for taking the exam.

The Day Before the Exam

- Take some time off. Relax. Take a walk, get a massage, spend time with friends and family who are comforting and supportive, see a movie, etc.
- Make sure everything is ready for you to leave the next morning.
- Prepare yourself for how you will deal with nervousness or stress tomorrow – do you need to have a physical relaxation routine or a mantra to repeat in your head (e.g. “You know this, you’ll be fine.”)?

Taking the Exam

- Put each question in your own words so you are clear about what is being asked.
- Do not look at the answers until you have thought of your own answer; then look for your answer in the list.
- Do not skip questions – deal with the question and move on.
- Limit use of marking questions to 2-3 per block.
- Be cautious about changing answers – do not change unless you have a good reason to do so.
- For long questions:
 - Read the last line first, and then read the question from the beginning
 - Paraphrase after each sentence in the question.

Stanford Student-Recommended Sources

- First Aid for USMLE Step 1 (most highly recommended)
- Goljan Audio Lectures and Rapid Review
- USMLE World Question Bank; Kaplan Question Bank (some recommend using Kaplan for subject-specific practice questions, World for predictive scores). USMLE World seems to be preferred by Stanford students.
 - Some students believe Kaplan is easier, so use Kaplan until you feel more confident in a content area, and then move on to World.
- High Yield Series
- Pathoma Fundamentals of Pathology
- Underground Clinical Vignettes, First Aid Cases for the USMLE Step 1 (not highest yield – do them when tired or need to switch things up)

Programs

Recommended for those who might have a hard time sticking to their own schedule

- <http://www.doctorsintraining.com>
- <http://www.pass-program.com>
- <http://www.usmlesuccess.net>
- <http://www.usmlesuccess.net>
- <http://www.marshall.edu/medhelp/> (for students with ADHD, LD)

Other Sites with Useful Information

- http://blog.myalbert.einstein.yu.edu/step1s2s/files/2011/04/Creating_Step_1_Schedule.pdf
- <http://www.kevinmd.com/blog/2012/04/scored-257-usmle-step-1.html>
- <http://tulane.edu/som/ome/upload/USMLE-Step-1-Guide-7-31-2012.pdf>
- <http://usmlestep1secrets.blogspot.com>
- <http://zone.medschool.pitt.edu/Announcement%20Attachments/step1%202010-11%20Plan.pdf>

- <http://www.feinberg.northwestern.edu/education/current-students/academic-resources/academic-counseling/preparation-resources/what-worked-best.html>
- <http://medicalmindmaps.com>
- <http://picmonic.com>
- <http://ankisrs.net>
- <https://www.firecracker.me>
- <http://cramfighter.com>
- <https://onlinemeded.org>

Podcast Resources

- <http://internetmedicine.com/medical-podcasts/>
- <http://want2bemd.tumblr.com/post/47058021864/podcasts-every-medical-student-should-listen-to>
- <https://itunes.apple.com/us/genre/podcasts-medicine/id1478?mt=2>

Notes from Student Panel on 10/28/14

- Major piece of advice from each individual:
 - Don't worry about it until your study period!
 - Do Step 1 practice problems as you study for HHD
 - You can't know everything, so try your best and let it go!
 - Learn information from reading, and then do practice questions from Q Banks
 - Schedule in time for yourself
 - Consolidate resources - don't use too many different ones
 - Don't buy all the materials - focus on 2-3 key ones
 - Get enough sleep and do other things besides studying
 - Concept are not always represented well in books – Q Banks represent them better
- What were the most useful resources?
 - First Aid, Pathoma, USMLE World
 - Goljan audio
 - NBME practice tests were worth the money; take them the last couple of weeks during study period
 - Buy UWorld package with tests; the assessments on UWorld were predictive
 - Kaplan, but don't get discouraged if you're not scoring high
 - Try not to worry about what other people are telling you to use if it doesn't work for you
 - Flashcards – some recommend for micro or pharm – but don't do it if that's not your style
 - Picmonic – looks dumb, but works – give it a couple of days

- What other advice do you have for studying?
 - Take a practice test at the center. Do a practice run with bathroom, food, etc. You take 3 blocks and get your percentage right. It is free. You don't get the score. Less for predicting exam and more for getting used to location.
 - Be okay with low scores at the beginning of study period. Get a feel for the topics at first.
 - Annotate First Aid. Use the PDF version – highlight as you go and un-highlight as you learn it. Do 2-3 passes of First Aid.
 - Don't need DIT. Watch Pathoma videos.

- How important to have newest edition of First Aid?
 - Doesn't matter. 2014 not that different. Download the PDF of errors for older versions. For peace of mind, get the newest one.

- How did you map out each week?
 - Didn't stick to detailed schedule – don't know how much time things will take.
 - Have broad goals – First Aid, NBME once a week, mostly questions. Will underestimate how much time you are spending at the start.
 - Have all of your strategies and materials figured out ahead of time. Don't add.
 - Want to get through 3-4,000 questions total. Takes more time to review questions than it does to answer them.

- Where did you study?
 - Didn't go home.
 - Consider distractions.
 - Didn't come to medical school – didn't want to be stressed out. Being away from other med students keeps it in perspective.
 - Very clearly define when you are studying and when you are not.

- How do you know whether or not to push the test back?
 - After 3-4 weeks of study, you'll panic and want to push it back, but push through it unless there is a serious problem. Not a big deal to do it, though, so don't be too hard on yourself.

- Anyone can do well – put in the time, and you can do fine!

- Never felt like I cracked it, still felt badly afterward, but everyone feels that way!