TEST PREPARATION

Many of the programs in the health sciences have a qualifying examination. Some require a standard examination, like the Graduate Records Examination (GRE). Others have an examination developed especially for their area, such as the Medical College Aptitude Test (MCAT) for medicine and the Dental Aptitude Test (DAT) for dentistry.

To make things confusing, in some health science areas, schools may require different examinations. For instance, some veterinary schools require the VMCAT, others the GRE, and some accept both.

Virtually all medical schools require the MCAT, an arduous day-long examination consisting of four sections: biological sciences, physical sciences, verbal reasoning, and writing. Although students must have a strong background in the sciences to do well on the MCAT, it does not test recall of scientific knowledge per se. Rather, the science portions of the test are largely based on passages, which may contain ideas and information new to the student. The questions on these passages test one’s ability to make sense of new information, apply basic scientific understanding to new concepts, and draw conclusions from evidence and data. Therefore, preparation for the MCAT should include course work that develops reading and reasoning skills, as well as course work that enlarges scientific understanding.

The MCAT and the medical school application process place a great deal of emphasis on verbal reasoning and communications skills. Even the science sections of the MCAT are based on close reading and evaluation of written passages, not memorized knowledge about science. Sometimes, students are so intent on their science course work that they neglect or avoid taking courses that emphasize reading, writing and verbal communication. But of the four MCAT scores, the Verbal Reasoning and Writing are the hardest to improve through concentrated study. These skills need to be built up over time. An academic program that includes a healthy sampling of courses in history, literature, philosophy and other fields where verbal reasoning is emphasized is highly recommended.

The ten and three-quarter courses required for the pre-med program can be accommodated within any major at the university. Medical schools do not give preference to biology and chemistry majors. In fact, the major with the highest acceptance rate is philosophy.

Most of the major tests (MCAT, DAT, OAT, etc.) offer extensive test preparation and practice materials, usually for free or for a minimal charge. These are of excellent quality and generally include full-length, previously given practice tests. Check the test’s website for information about these materials. There are a number of commercial providers of test preparation courses, including Kaplan and Princeton Review, both of which now offer online reviews and courses that minimize the amount of your preparation time spent traveling.