

USMLE Step 2 CK

About the test

The United States Medical Licensure Exam Step 2 Clinical Knowledge (USMLE Step 2 CK) is the second licensing exam in the series, typically taken after completing clinical rotations in the third year of medical school. The test contains 8 blocks. Each block is 60 minutes. The number of questions in each block varies but is usually 38-40 questions. The total number of questions on the test will not exceed 318. The test is 50-60% Medicine, 25-30% Surgery, 20-25% Peds, 15-20% Ob/gyn, and 10-15% Psych. There will be ethics, biostats, and article review questions. (**Ali Abbas, Class of 2025**)

- Break time:
 - You have 45 minutes of designated break time throughout the test.
 - Skipping the 15-minute tutorial at the beginning adds that time to your break time.
 - Unused time from completed sections is added to your break time.
- Question style:
 - Questions are written in NBME-style, similar to the shelf exams you take after each rotation.
 - They primarily focus on: clinical work-up, diagnostic findings, treatment choices (considering comorbidities and side effects), next best step in management. In addition, questions regarding ethics, hospital systems, and quality improvement have been recently added.
- Step 2 generally emphasizes clinical application over the nitty gritty biochemistry-type questions, which tend to be more prominent on Step 1.

Study materials

Remember to tailor your study approach to your learning style, and as best as you can, try not to compare your study style to your friends who may have different learning styles. It's okay if your preparation methods differ from those you used during rotations (for example, not using Anki during Step 2 dedicated when you had throughout all of your rotations).

- **UWorld (required):** The goal is to have completed your first pass of UWorld during your clinical rotations.

- Reset your UW deck for Step 2 preparation. There are also a few hundred additional Step 2 UW questions that were not included in the UW questions you did for your rotations.
- Consider doing sets of questions by specialty to relearn some material. You can also combine specialties such as OBGYN/peds and psych/neuro for question sets.
 - I found that by compartmentalizing questions, I was able to review more effectively. (**Camille Powers, Class of 2025**)
- You will get fully mixed question sets on your practice tests, though you can also do practice questions with all specialties mixed as well.
- Complete as much as is helpful; 100% completion isn't necessary.
 - I only completed about 35% of UW after resetting the deck and was able to surpass my own goal score. (**Camille Powers, Class of 2025**)
 - It is challenging to do more than 80 questions daily with thorough review.
- **AMBOSS (required):** Use as a supplement to UWorld or as a primary question bank (eg, if you find yourself having memorized UW questions). Can also do focused question sets on specific pathologies. **It is critical to review AMBOSS's sections on ethics, quality improvement, hospital systems, and drug ad questions** (links below).
 - [Health care system](#)
 - [Infection prevention and control](#)
 - [Patient communication and counseling](#)
 - [Overview of palliative medicine](#)
 - [Principles of medical law and ethics](#)
 - [Death](#)
 - [Quality improvement \(*Improvement of health care quality*\)](#)
 - [Patient safety](#)
- **NBME practice tests (required):** Most similar to the actual Step 2 exam. Do as many as you can, but focus on the most recent tests if time is limited as they are the most similar to Step 2.
- **Divine Interventions** (optional, but HIGHLY recommended): Useful for biostatistics, ethics, and targeted topic review. There are also lists of recommended high yield podcasts for Step 2 prep. Access notes compiled by other students for efficient review (<https://divineinterventionpodcasts.com/notes/>).
 - I found that he helped me make associations between disease processes that I may not have made otherwise, and he understands the way the USMLE test takers like to ask questions. (**Camille Powers, Class of 2025**)
- **YouTube** (optional, for video/visual learners): Helpful channels are Dirty Medicine as well as rewatching the shelf exam reviews from Emma Holliday, Divine Interventions, and Dr. HY. IM and surgery in particular comprise a large portion of Step 2, so I would focus on those as well as your weakest subjects.
- **Anki** (optional): Use if it aligns with your learning style.

- Anecdotally, as a steadfast Anki person during preclerkship and rotations alike, I did NOT use Anki during my Step 2 prep. (**Camille Powers, Class of 2025**)
- **First Aid for USMLE Step 2 CK** (optional, for people who learn by reading): Provides a high-level content overview.

AOA member comments:

- “For me, I essentially used just two resources: UWorld and practice tests. I did 3-4 blocks (40q's) of UWorld a day, with interspersed practice tests. For practice tests, I used NBME 10, 11, 13, UW 1 and 2, and Free 120.” (**Jinghan Zhang, Class of 2025**)
- “My studying was comprised of really just a few resources: UWorld, NBMEs, and a few review videos. I went through all of UW over dedicated which is the gold standard resource and should take up the majority of your time. For practice tests, I only did two: NBME 11 and 10. I avoided UW tests since I personally felt throughout rotations UW questions were not as representative of the real test/scoring for me and better for learning/practice. Lastly, I also watched a mix of shelf review videos from Divine Intervention, Dr. High Yield, and Emma Holliday to refresh my knowledge in rotations I felt weaker in or did earlier.” (**Dru Annapureddy, Class of 2025**)

Preparation time

The recommended preparation time for Step 2 CK can be broken down into two phases:

1. Long-term preparation (alongside clinical rotations):
 - Duration: Throughout clinical rotations
 - Intensity: 1-2 hours daily
 - Focus: UW question bank, Anki, and other review materials
2. Dedicated study period:
 - Duration: 4-6 weeks (4 weeks is generally sufficient)
 - Intensity: 8-12 hours per day of focused study

Sample 4-Week Study Plan:

- Week 1-2:
 - Take a baseline practice exam to gauge your initial performance and tailor your study plan accordingly.
 - Intensive content review (target information you are the weakest on/the clinical rotations you had the longest time ago) and practice questions.
 - Begin weekly practice tests leading up to the exam, with your last practice exam 6-7 days prior to your exam.
 - Focus on the review of what you missed (including question style, not just content).

- Seek help EARLY If by the end of week 2, you are not progressing as you desire. Do NOT wait until the end of your dedicated period to reach out for help.
 - Reach out to older trusted students or the Student Academic Support Services.
- Week 3-4: Heavy emphasis on practice exams and synthesizing reviewed material. Can rewatch YouTube review videos (Emma Holliday, Divine, Dr. HY) here for detailed, but high level overview of different subjects.
 - Take ≥ 2 -3 full length practice exams, simulating test conditions to experiment with your break time and increase your endurance for test day.

AOA member comments:

- “I started studying during my second week of spring break and gave myself around 4 weeks to study. I think 4-5 weeks is the perfect amount of time to get enough material in, but not become too burnt out from studying. On a day to day, I studied for 12 hours. I gave myself a half day off every 3-4 days.” (**Jinghan Zhang, Class of 2025**)
- “Like many others, I took 4 weeks of dedicated time off after my last rotation to study for step. Any more time would have been too long and even less time would have likely been fine also. During that time period, I would study for approximately 8-10 hours a day. I would take 2 half days off each week. Something important to remember is that you're effectively studying for step 2 for all of third year. The dedicated period is primarily used as a period to sharpen and consolidate your knowledge instead of learning a bunch of new things.” (**Dru Annapureddy, Class of 2025**)

Scheduling your test

- Aim to take the exam soon after completing clinical rotations.
- Most students take it between May and August.
- Consider taking it in May/June to allow time for residency application preparation.
- Ensure you have your score before submitting your ERAS application (typically around September 24th).

AOA member comments:

- “I scheduled my exam during winter break to make sure that I would be able to get the most options for the time that I wanted. I took the first month (April) of my scholarly activity to study for it and scheduled for beginning of May.” (**Jinghan Zhang, Class of 2025**)
- “I scheduled my exam during winter break for the end of May, which was 4 weeks after my last rotation finished. It is highly recommended to take the exam soon after

you finish your last rotation (or during scholarly if you end on scholarly) to minimize forgetting information.” (**Dru Annapureddy, Class of 2025**)

Recommendations for test day

- Prepare mentally: You will see things you have never heard of, and you will need brain power to think critically about questions on test day.
 - Get ample rest in the days leading up to the exam.
 - Take the day before the exam off or limit review.
- Bring essentials:
 - Comfort food snacks
 - Plenty of water (some centers do not have water bottle refill stations)
 - Ibuprofen/acetaminophen for headache
- At the testing center:
 - Arrive early
 - Locate the bathroom before the test & determine if you will need a key to access the bathroom at your testing facility.
- Break strategy:
 - Experiment with different approaches during practice exams
 - Different approaches:
 - Taking short breaks after every section + a longer lunch break
 - Taking slightly longer breaks after every couple of sections
 - A combination of the above (eg, doing the first two sections back to back then taking breaks after each section)
 - Most people take around 10-20 minutes for lunch. Typically, this will occur after the fourth or fifth section depending on your preference and how you are feeling.
 - Pay attention to how much break time you have left, because if you run out of break time, your next section will automatically start.

Changes since Step 1 became pass/fail

Since Step 1 became pass/fail in January 2022, Step 2 CK has is now the only truly standardized metric by which to compare applicants for residency, though the implications are still not fully known. Some programs may use Step 2 CK scores as a screening tool or have cut off scores, while others may not. Aim to perform your best and have scores available when submitting ERAS applications.

You can find the mean/median Step 2 scores for the matched applicants in the specialty/specialties you are applying into on Texas STAR

(<https://app.powerbi.com/groups/me/reports/903aad6a-750d-455d-9f09->

2b40a19e6757/ReportSection375956934d392c53640e?ctid=9d418695-71ac-4c31-b5b2-c196c8ec3c8a&openReportSource=ReportInvitation&experience=power-bi).

Other advice

- Study diligently for shelf exams during rotations to build a strong foundation that you can build on during your Step 2 preparation.
- Do NOT neglect preparation for biostatistics, ethics, and quality improvement sections – there are many of these questions on the exam (even if there aren't as many on your practice tests!)
- Establish a comforting pre-exam routine (for example, I got the Starbucks coffee and breakfast sandwich before each practice test and did the same thing on test day, which gave me a sense of comfort due to the familiarity).
- Remember, you've prepared extensively for this moment. Trust in your abilities and approach the exam with confidence. Good luck!

This guide is written by Camille Powers, Class of 2025, with contributions from other AOA members as noted above.