

How to research and evaluate specialties

Careers in Medicine



More than 120 specialties for the practice of medicine exist — this is a lot to choose from. So, how do you select something you'll be happy with for the rest of your professional life?

You may have entered medical school with a specialty already in mind, completely undecided, or somewhere in between. Regardless of where you find yourself on the continuum of this decision, rest assured where you are is typical. Here are seven steps you can take to learn about, evaluate, and validate your options.

Take stock. It's critical to honestly understand your values, skills, and interests as you consider specialties. What's most important in your life and career? What do you want out of your profession? How do you want to give back? What kind of physician career will make you happy and your patients satisfied? Ultimately, you must identify the career options that maximize your preferences and minimize elements you deem undesirable.

Taking the CiM self-assessments, such as the [MSPI-R](#) and [PVIPS](#), can help you begin to find your fit and narrow your choices by pinpointing what you want most from your professional and personal life. Consider specialties that currently interest you or the specialties your assessment results suggest. Use the results of your assessments as well as other preferences you've identified as broad criteria to start narrowing your list of possible specialties. Look for general characteristics or activities — such as providing diagnostic-oriented care versus performing procedures, or providing short-term versus continuous care — that draw you to those specialties.

Read about specialties. Review the [list of medical specialties](#) — there may be some you've never heard of that pique your interest. Delve into ones you're curious about, reading the general descriptions, patient profiles, competitiveness data, and salary and lifestyle information. Also, peruse journals and the Web sites of specialty societies for current happenings in specialties of interest.

If you're captivated by what you're reading, add those specialties to the list of those to explore further. Make a list of the top five you're interested in.

Engage with specialties through formal and informal experiences during medical school. The best research you can do involves experiencing specialties first-hand. Extracurricular activities, particularly during first and second year, are a good place to start. Participate in student interest groups, research, and [informational interviews](#) with physicians to explore various specialties and settings. Also attend as many programs, panels, workshops, and other opportunities your school offers as possible.

The content of your first- and second-year courses may also help you consider your likes and dislikes. The intensive clinical experience of third year is where most students “try-on” various specialties to find where they fit. While on rotations, assess your experience. Consider for each of your clerkship experiences what you know about the following:

- The work
 - What systems, diseases, and patient types do these physicians treat?
 - What, if any, procedures do they perform?
 - What are the doctor-patient relationships like?
 - In what settings is this specialty practiced?

- Do physicians work with a variety of common medical problems or with singular, specialized problems?
 - What other specialists and health care team members do these physicians most often work with?
- Characteristics of physicians
 - What values, interests, skills, and personality types are common among physicians in this specialty?
- Training and residency requirements
 - How long is the training?
 - Am I required to complete a preliminary year of training or training in a major specialty prior to further specializing?
 - How competitive is this option and can I compete (e.g., grades, USMLE scores)?
 - What residency training programs are available and where are they located?
 - What are options for fellowship or subspecialty training?
- Lifestyle and salary
 - What is the average number of hours worked per week?
 - What is the on-call schedule like?
 - What is the typical number of patient visits in a day?
 - What salary range can I expect?
- Issues facing professionals in the field
 - What are the current issues facing physicians in this specialty?
 - What research questions are being studied and how interesting are these topics to me?
 - Is the demand for physicians in this specialty expected to grow or decline?

Consider your career priorities. During these hands-on experiences, you might discover a specialty isn't what you expected or another may become more appealing.

During your rotations, note your impressions and fit for each specialty. When you complete a rotation, ask "Can I see myself in this specialty everyday for the next 30 years?" Accept that you'll likely change your mind about a specialty — it happens to most medical students.

Consider your competitiveness for the specialties you're considering. At the end of your second year, you'll take the USMLE® Step 1 exam. Highly competitive programs will likely require strong clerkship grades and USMLE scores. Realistically [assess your qualifications](#) — and you may be more qualified than you think or be able to increase your competitiveness. But don't rely on the student grapevine for this important information.

Review the [competitiveness data for medical specialties](#). Much of the data available through CiM originates from the joint AAMC/NRMP® report  [Charting Outcomes in the Match](#). This report provides USMLE Step 1 and Step 2 scores, number of publications, participation in research projects, length of rank order list, and membership in Alpha Omega Alpha medical honor society for matched and unmatched applicants in each of 19 specialties. Also contact your student affairs office for school-specific profiles of where previous students have matched and their qualifications.

Talk it out. Discuss your thoughts and perceptions of the specialties with a trusted resource to help you reach a decision. Your advisor or student affairs office may be able to help you sort through your ideas. Examine your options from multiple angles and perspectives:

- consider the *facts and information you've gathered about the specialties you're considering*;
- consider the *concerns* about a specialty that may require you to proceed with some caution;
- consider the *positive aspects or outcomes* associated with each option;
- consider *your emotions and feelings* about each option;
- creatively consider each specialty, *brainstorming ideas and generating solutions to some of the concerns or negative aspects* or outcomes you identified.

Creating a picture with these considerations can support narrowing your options toward a decision.

If you're having difficulty making a decision, consider taking or retaking the [Specialty Indecision Scale](#) assessment. It can help you pinpoint the possible cause of your indecision and provide suggested activities to help you progress. Often, you can use the first part of your fourth year to complete clerkships or electives in the specialties you're considering.

Be realistic. Ensure you're realistically assessing your top choices and your competitiveness for each of these specialties. With rising medical school enrollments and stagnant growth of residency training positions, competition for residency positions is increasing. Discussing your decision with an advisor or faculty member can inspire new ideas or opinions. These folks can ensure you're realistically evaluating your options and are competitive in the specialty you've chosen as well as discuss [parallel plans](#) and strategies for success in the match.