

Making your specialty decision

There are many routes to choosing a specialty. And there may be several specialties that will provide you career satisfaction and success. Now it's time to evaluate your options and make a decision.

There is no magic formula to decision making. This is especially true when deciding on something as important as your career. Different people have different strategies for making important decisions. Some use a systematic approach such as weighing pros and cons, and some use a spontaneous approach by choosing whatever intuitively feels right.

Decision-making strategies

Review your CiM assessment results and compare it with information you gathered about specialties. Is there a specialty that compares more favorably with your MSPI or PVIPS results? Do you need to experience other specialties or are you ready to make this decision? Do you need to retake an assessment now that you have more clinical experience? Your self-assessment and clinical experiences influences your thinking about yourself and your fit — it's always good to have current and accurate information.

Use what has worked in the past. Think about important decisions you've already made, and list strategies you employed in making those decisions. How did you decide which college or medical school to attend? You may have had conversations with family and alumni; you may have visited campuses or reviewed school information. Whatever strategies have worked before should be a part of your decision-making game plan.

Talk it over. Discuss your options with advisors and mentors. What specialty(ies) are you considering and how confident are you in your ability to succeed? How competitive are you? Are you being realistic and do you need a parallel plan? Discuss specialty choice with people you trust and who know you well — they may provide useful ideas and opinions. The choice is ultimately yours but get feedback from trusted colleagues and mentors.

Write it out. Write a personal statement for each specialty you're considering. Is one more difficult to write? Is it easier to articulate why you want to be in one specialty versus another? If you're having a difficult time writing about your chosen specialty, you may have more thinking to do. Program directors and faculty will ask how and why you chose your specialty. Your ability to articulate your fit and career goals will help you both make this decision and answer questions in the residency application and interview process.

Timing

It's helpful to make your specialty decision by the summer of third year. This will give you time to research residency programs, prepare application materials, and be ready for your fourth year where all your hard work will come to fruition. Don't worry if you're still undecided — you can complete clerkships in the specialties you're considering early in fourth year.

Implications of switching specialties during residency

The most common reasons residents switch specialties is because they

- realize their initial choice is not as interesting as another specialty, or
- desire a different lifestyle, level of flexibility, or income.

And while you're not trapped, the decision to switch is a serious one. The funding a teaching hospital receives for graduate medical education is based on the length of your initial residency program. If you change specialties after entering residency and the length of residency is longer for the new specialty, the stipend paid to the hospital may be less for any additional years of training. Some teaching hospitals may take funding into consideration when considering you for a residency program in a new specialty and others may not. There are many factors other than reimbursement that go into residency decisions. The "Medicare Payments for Graduate Medical Education" brochure details funding implications of switching specialties after you've started residency.

Ultimately, do what's best for you and your career as a physician. By putting serious thought and attention into this decision now, you'll be less likely to switch specialties.