

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Please find below answers to common questions around the Covid-related Waiver granted by the UWSOM Curriculum Committee to allow Students to Delay taking their USMLE Step 1 Examination until after Starting their Patient Care Phase:

1. When will Step 1 become pass-fail?

- a. This is unknown. NBME has stated that Step 1 will be transitioned to pass/fail **no earlier** than January 2022. There is no guarantee the transition will be made at that time, and it is unknown when the transition will occur. It is possible the transition will be delayed because of administrative delays at NBME due to Covid. Updates are expected in 2021.

2. What changes to content will occur with Step 1 and Step 2?

- a. In October 2020, the NBME modified Step 1 to focus more on foundational science concepts. Beginning in **October 2020**, Step 1 will increase the number of items assessing communication skills and reduce the number of Patient Care: Management questions to 0.
- b. Beginning in **November 2020**, Step 2 CK will increase the number of items assessing systems-based practice, patient safety, legal/ethical issues, and professionalism and reduce the number of items that assess Medical Knowledge: Apply Foundational Science Concepts to 0.
- c. <https://covid.usmle.org/announcements/step-1-and-step-2-clinical-knowledge-ck-content-distribution-changes>

3. What is the standard study program for Step 1?

- a. The consolidation and transition course includes structured review of foundational material. Following this, students execute the tailored individualized study plan they have developed in consultation with their Learning Specialist. This plan typically includes practice exams to track progress, provide personal feedback, and identify areas requiring additional focus, and to determine readiness for examination.

4. Will delaying the Step exam increase my chances of getting a higher score?

- a. This is hard to know, but the current structure and schedule of the UWSOM curriculum is designed for students to prepare for and take Step 1 following the Foundations phase when the content most relevant to the Step 1 exam has been covered most recently. UWSOM has a longer dedicated Step 1 study period than many other medical schools. The longer the gap between learning/dedicated study and test-taking, the greater the risk of knowledge decay (forgetting the material). Students with lower grades may be more sensitive to gaps based on the literature.
- b. UWSOM students have been performing well with the existing Step 1 schedule, with increasing mean Step 1 scores relative to national averages in the last couple years. There is currently no data regarding whether required clerkships will help or hurt success on the new formatted Step 1 exam, and delaying Step 1 further from foundations is expected to reduce retention of foundations content that will be tested on Step 1. Other schools that have students take Step after clinical clerkships include designated blocks where students return to campus to reinforce foundations material. This is not feasible with the structure of UWSOM training.
- c. That said, if it feels like you will be unable to study for the step exam during the dedicated study period (Jan – Mar) because of Covid and related responsibilities, delaying the exam and starting the patient care phase, and possibly delaying your graduation date may make sense for you rather than risking failing the Step exam.

5. Can I start clerkships early?

- a. No. The consolidation and transition course is a required course that can only be taken in Winter Quarter and must be taken prior to the start of clerkships, so the earliest clerkships can be taken is in Spring Quarter.

6. Can I take the exam anytime during the clinical phase? How about during an elective block?

- a. Yes. One consideration is that clerkship schedules tend to consist of a full-time (60-80 h/wk) clinical schedule coupled with nightly preparation for the following day's work combined with the need to study for shelf exams concurrently, which leaves limited time for additional study for the Step exam. Elective courses may or may not have more flexible schedules depending on the elective. You can choose not to take a course during an elective block and use this time to study, but the timing may be limited and enrolling in fewer credits during the quarter may affect your financial aid.

7. Can I take an elective block in the Winter Quarter of 2022 to study for Step 1?

- a. Due to limitations on clerkship capacity in the Patient Care phase, an elective block during Winter quarter 2022 will not necessarily be available to study for or take Step 1. (Since Winter quarter is typically a time of high clerkship availability, almost all students will need to take required clerkships during that quarter in order to ensure that they can meet the requirements of Patient Care phase on time.)

8. If I opt for the delay, what is the deadline for taking Step 1 & Step 2?

- a. Step 1 must be taken before entering the Explore and Focus Phase, and no later than June 30, 2022. Of note, the deadline for taking Step 2 is also June 30, 2022.

9. If I delay taking Step 1, will I have to expand (i.e. delay my graduation year)?

- a. Likely. If delaying the exam results in your needing to take time away from clerkships to study, there may be insufficient time to complete all required clerkships and electives needed in time for residency applications. This would result in expansion/delay in graduation year.

10. If I find during my designated Step1 study time that I need additional time to reach my target Step 1 score, can I delay taking the exam and begin my clerkships with the hopes that I can continue my studies and improve my score?

- a. Throughout the consolidation and transition period you will be doing periodic practice exams to give you feedback on your progress. If your progress and performance on these practice exams does not seem predictive of success, you will be encouraged to meet with one of the SA Deans to discuss pathways to success. For some students, this can mean taking a leave of absence to extend their study time. For others, this could mean starting clerkships with the hope that the clinical experience could provide clinical anchors for learning foundational material. This potential benefit must of course be weighed against the risk of further knowledge decay, and the challenges of balancing a full-time clinical schedule along with shelf exam studying, step studying, personal needs/commitments, and further burnout. Either route can result in delay in graduation date. If your practice scores are in the passing range by the end of the dedicated study time, you are required to take the exam. Further delays run the risk of study burnout and declining exam scores.

11. Can I delay the start of my clerkships by 1 rotation so I can have more time to study for the Step Exam?

- a. No. However, students with practice scores not predictive of a passing USMLE Step 1 score can delay the start of their clerkship by dropping an entire quarter at least 6 weeks prior to the start date of the clerkship. These students are required to meet with a Dean in Student Affairs to initiate a leave of absence for summer quarter, or to initiate the process to enroll in an independent study course for additional dedicated study time (which requires Course Director approval). Students who delay starting their clerkship will be dropped from their entire Patient Care Phase clerkship schedule.

12. Would students delaying step still have to pay tuition for the dedicated study period?

- a. Yes. The Consolidation and Transition course is a graduation requirement and is only offered in Winter Quarter.

13. If I am an MSTP student, can I defer taking my Step exam until during or after my PhD program?

- a. No. MD-PhD students are expected to take the exam prior to starting their research period.

Other considerations:

- Delaying the exam to Spring quarter 2022 will involve taking Step 1 and 2 within a short period of time (by June 30, 2022).
- Delaying Step 1 may affect student eligibility for certain electives (typically some away rotations) that require a Step 1 score (or evidence of a pass) prior to scheduling, which may limit specialty choices or residency program options
- Delaying Step 1 may have an impact on competitiveness for residency.
- Any fail grades, either in clerkship (including shelf exam), or Step 1 exam will very likely result in an expansion/delay in your graduation date.
- Delaying the exam will likely require expansion of the curriculum in order to meet requirements and would postpone graduation date. This could result in additional tuition and fees.
- Of note, the UWSOM has a longer consolidation study period for Step 1 than many other medical schools.
- Some students whose exams have previously been delayed by Prometric closures due to Covid have reported experiencing significant challenges studying Step 1 material in

addition to Clerkship shelf exam content while performing all clinical responsibilities on clerkship rotations. (Clinical responsibilities typically constitute a full-time schedule throughout the entire rotation).

If you have other questions or would like to discuss your individual situation, please contact adminsa@uw.edu to set up an appointment with an SA Dean.