How to Apply to Medical School

We are looking for students with high academic ability who have thought deeply about what it means to be a doctor and who show enthusiasm for life and an interest in people. Medicine is an immensely rewarding career, and demands commitment, hard work and physical and emotional stamina.

We hope you will apply to St George’s. I advise you to submit your application early. Dr Phillip Hay, Sub-Dean for Medical Admissions.

How to Apply
A Levels

All Medical Schools require Chemistry at A-level and at least one other science; most require Biology to at least AS level. See the table in the appendix for the specific entry requirements for the schools you are interested in.

A typical medical school candidate will offer Chemistry, Biology and Mathematics or Physics. A fourth subject to at least AS level is often a requirement and usually an advantage. Some schools like to see a more diverse fourth subject (e.g. a language or English), which demonstrates a breadth of interest and ability.

The minimum grade requirement at A2 is ABB with most schools accepting only AAB or AAA and Cambridge requiring A*AA for 2010 entry. Medical schools generally give offers based on A-level grades, not UCAS points (so e.g. AAC would not substitute for an ABB offer).

The GCSE requirements vary from one school to another (check the appendix for these). It goes without saying that you have to have a very strong academic background to be considered (i.e. mostly A* and A grades).

Students who do not have the ability to gain A grades at GCSE and A-level will probably find the medicine course and career too challenging for them, and should be realistic about considering other alternative careers.

Are you a straight-A student? Last year, on one of their interview days, the weakest candidate interviewed for King’s College Medical School had 4 A’s at AS-level and 9 A*s at GCSE...

Some medical schools ask for a pass in other exams such as the UKCAT and BMAT exams (see section below). For Oxbridge, you also need to fill in a specific entry form in addition to your UCAS form. Overseas students especially need to make sure that they read the university prospectuses very carefully to ensure that they meet all the specific entry requirements.

Medical school applicants will also be tested on their non-academic qualities and qualifications. Personal attributes required to become a successful doctor will be examined through the UCAS form and also usually at interview.

Medical applicants also need to demonstrate other interests outside the academic curriculum such as music and sports, which develop personal skills and make a more rounded individual. Teamwork and responsibility or leadership are key skills that need to be demonstrated through school clubs, societies, social groups, etc.

Don’t forget the Ashbourne Theatre Company (ATC) and the annual School Revue...

Before a medical school candidate can be admitted to university, he or she must complete a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check of previous convictions, and have been successfully vaccinated against Hepatitis B. This takes several months, as a test to show the vaccination has produced antibodies needs to be carried out 4-6 weeks after the vaccination.

In the last 5 years applications to medical school in the UK have increased by 88%. The ratio of applications to places is now around 10:1 at most medical schools...

The UCAS Form
All applications to UK medical schools need to be made via the UCAS website in the same way as any other university applications. The UCAS applications open in mid September and this year’s deadline is the 15th of October.

You can apply to only 4 medical schools on your UCAS form. This leaves you an extra place on your form if you wish to apply for a different course e.g. biomedical science. Students are often worried about what to do with the extra place and it is something that you need to think seriously about. The medical school will not see the other courses you have applied for unless you apply for two courses at the same university.

Some people like to use the extra place as a backup in case they change their mind about doing medicine after applying. N.B. You cannot apply for veterinary medicine or dentistry as your other option.

**Backup Applications**: Biomedical Science, Pharmacology, Immunology, Biological Sciences, Zoology, and many more...

As medicine courses are so competitive, it is always a safe option to apply to an additional non-medical course to maximise your chances of getting a university offer. It is usually possible, if you don’t receive any offers for medicine, to start a non-medical course at a university and then re-apply through a graduate-entry programme later on. Be aware that these courses, however, are often even more competitive to get onto.

Even if you are applying to a non-medical course, you should tailor your personal statement to medicine. Other degree programmes are aware that students apply to their courses as a backup to other degrees and are sympathetic to it...

The importance of a well-prepared UCAS form cannot be overemphasised. Writing the full form will take AT LEAST a month of work. In preparation, you need to obtain the originals of all examination qualification certificates, or good quality photocopies, by the beginning of the Upper 6th year. The final version is submitted on-line.

There are 6 sections on the form:-

- Registration Details: basic personal data such as date of birth and current address;
- About You: further personal details such as nationality and fee code;
- Your Courses: you can only enter Medicine for 4 courses (see above);
- Your education: details or schools, qualifications and grades;
- Your Employment History;
- Personal Statement (see below).

**Personal Statement - Standing out from the Crowd**

The personal statement on your UCAS form is your chance to convince the universities that you have thought carefully about a career in medicine and you are committed and motivated enough to make a good doctor. It is your opportunity to stand out from the crowd and the primary way in which a choice can be made between you and another equally suitable candidate.

Only 500 words are permitted so it is imperative that you are as concise as possible and that everything you write is completely relevant. If you are interviewed, you may well be asked about material from your personal statement, so make sure that it is truthful and you will be able to add to the information you have given on the form.

You need to:-

- Explain why you wish to study medicine and the factors that influenced your decision. Think hard about what attracts you to medicine and avoid cliches (e.g. "I have always been fascinated by..." and “Ever since I was a child...”) You should explain how your
choice was a result of considered research and deliberation. If you can’t answer this question, should you really be applying?;

- Demonstrate your commitment to medicine by:
  - Describing any work experience or voluntary work that you have done, what you learnt from it and how it helped you decide that medicine is right for you;
  - Listing any conferences or courses you have been on and what you gained from them;
  - Knowing your subject and being up-to-date - you need to demonstrate knowledge of topical issues in the field of medicine that interest you and describe why you are interested in certain areas.

- Highlight the specific personal attributes you have that would make you a suitable candidate to be a doctor. You need to back these up with specific examples via achievements in sport, music, hobbies and other interests. Medical schools want to see that you can work in a team and also hold a position of responsibility. (See section on personal attributes of a doctor).

Want to follow in your parents’ footsteps? A common reason for wishing to study medicine often cited by medical applicants, is a desire to “follow my mother/father who is/was a doctor”. This may be why you had an initial interest in medicine, but it is not sufficient to base your whole application on a desire to emulate a family member. In fact, candidates whose parents are medics may be treated more harshly as the admissions panel believe that students with a medical background should be able to clearly demonstrate, to a greater extent, what they have learned and what they know about the profession...

Hobbies and interests are vital to your application for medicine to demonstrate that you are a well-rounded individual. People who are totally absorbed in their studies to the exclusion of all else will lack some of the personal attributes that are key to making a good doctor.

Don’t just list or state achievements and attributes, you need to backup each statement with a specific example. Then be prepared to expand on these points in an interview. Commitment is really important and the medical school will want to know how long you have been pursuing your hobby, why you do it, what you gain from it and whether you have achieved anything.

Interests that involve groups, teamwork and communication are essential for demonstrating key skills for medicine.

Which sounds better? “I am good at organising things and at motivating others”, or “As captain of the School 1st XI, I learned to organise team training sessions and the importance of motivating others on the field”...

A second example: “I have been playing the guitar for three months in my bedroom”, or “I have played the trombone since I was nine, have passed grade 5 and play in the local band”...

Even if you are not musical or sporty, you can mention things like charity fundraising, The College Revue, languages, photography, travel or web design.

Your personal statement is exactly that - personal - and should be written by you, in your own personal style. No one else should be able to tell you the best way to write it, although it may be worthwhile looking at some examples to get an idea of the kind of content you should be including.

Example personal statements:-

- [http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Medicine_at_University](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/wiki/Medicine_at_University)
Your personal tutor will write your reference. A good reference needs to be earned and the tutors will be honest and frank. Personal tutors may contact previous schools to obtain further reference information. To earn a good reference is essential to be a good student. Ensure you are on time for lessons and with homework, avoiding creating unnecessary work for your tutors. Participate with enthusiasm in classes, and be consistent in your approach to work.

Are you a good student? It is not unknown for a tutor to retract a reference later in the academic year for a student who initially impressed but then lapsed into bad habits! Therefore, your consistent effort needs to be maintained throughout the school year...

Entry Examinations

In addition to sitting A-levels, most medical schools require you to sit another entry exam specific to medicine.

UKCAT - UK Clinical Aptitude Test

The UKCAT tests mental ability, problem solving, logical reasoning, critical thinking and information management. It is designed so that medical schools can make a more informed decision about applicants and ensure that the candidates they select have the best combination of mental ability, attitude and professional behaviour required for doctors to be successful in their clinical careers.

It does NOT have any science or curriculum content, so in theory, it cannot be revised for, although it is possible to practise questions to become familiar with the format.

Most medical schools require you to sit the UKCAT. You must register for the test on-line between May 1st and September 25th and it can be taken at an external centre between 7th July and 9th October. It costs £75 and lasts for 2 hours (this increases if you take it late).

There are around 150 test centres around the UK (the closest to Ashbourne is at London Bridge, Southwark). You get the results 1-2 months after you have taken the exam. UKCAT is entirely computer based and is not based on factual knowledge.

The UKCAT is only valid for one year. If your application to medical school is unsuccessful and you reapply the following year, you must retake the UKCAT...

Universities not signed up to UKCAT are Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Imperial, Liverpool, London Metropolitan, Oxford and University College.

The UKCAT tests a wide range of mental abilities and behavioural attributes identified by university Medical and Dental schools as important. The questions are all multiple-choice questions and the subsections are separately timed.

Remember that multiple-choice questions aim to give you the right answer plus several other answers that are almost correct but not quite. These are not trick questions but they require you to read all the options carefully. The paper is positively marked so put an answer for each question (don't leave any gaps). If you don't know the answer then eliminate any that are obviously wrong and then make a best guess. Pacing yourself is very important - note the time for each test and the number of questions.

There are five parts to the test:-

- **Verbal Reasoning**;
- **Quantitative Reasoning**;
• Abstract Reasoning;
• Decision Analysis.

Practice Questions

There are practice questions available on the UKCAT website (www.ukcat.ac.uk). This site is worth visiting to get an idea of the layout of the test, as it is computer based at the test centre.

There are also books of practice questions that may be useful: Passing the UK Clinical Aptitude Test and BMAT - Felicity Walker-Buckton, Rosalie Hutton, Glenn Hutton (Law Matters Publishing) ISBN 1-84641-037-1.

Practicing Aptitude Tests

If you have looked at the UKCAT specific questions on the website and in the book, there are a few other places which have tests you can practice which are quite similar. Many companies use aptitude tests in their recruitment processes that include verbal and quantitative reasoning tests similar to those in the UKCAT. There are also some places that use similar questionnaires to the non-cognitive analysis subtest, such as the Government's Civil Service recruitment scheme.

The following websites may be useful as practice, but be aware that the UKCAT test itself is slightly different:-

• www.drtest.co.uk;
• www.previsor.co.uk;
• www.kent.ac.uk/careers/psychotests.htm;
• www.shldirect.com.

BMAT - Biomedical Admissions Test

The BMAT is a two-hour exam made up of three sections:-

• Aptitude and Skills (multiple choice and short answer questions) - 60 mins;
• Scientific Knowledge and Applications (multiple choice and short answer questions) - 30 mins;
• Writing Task (short essay question) - 30 mins.

Ashbourne is a registered test centre for the BMAT. You receive the results by the start of December. The Universities which require you to take the BMAT test are Cambridge, Imperial, Oxford, the Royal Vet College and University College London.

Everything you need to prepare for the BMAT is on the website: http://www.admissionstests.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/adt/bmat/about.

There is also a book which you can use to help you get ready for the test: Preparing for the BMAT - John Butterworth & Dr. Geoff Thwaites, Cambridge Assessment ISBN: 9780-435280130.

There is a great page on the UCL website with practice questions and explanations of the answers with tips on how to go about each task: www.ucl.ac.uk/lapt/bmat.

Additional Reading

Suggested reading practice for UKCAT/BMAT:-

• Critical Thinking: An introduction (Cambridge University Press) A. Fisher;
• Critical Thinking for Students (How to Books 2000) R. van den Brink-Budgen;
• Thinking from A to Z (Routledge 2000) N. Warburton;
• New Directions: Reading, Writing and Critical Thinking (Cambridge University Press)
Interviews

The majority of medical schools interview the top candidates before offering places. These can take place anytime between November and April. It is important to prepare for these in advance and also practice giving answers to some of the more common questions out loud.

The structure varies from one medical school to another. One person or a panel of interviewers may interview you, and it may last 10 minutes or an hour. You may also have more than one interview.

Mike Kirby and John Wilson are now on the interview panel at UCL Medical School and can provide practice interviews and invaluable advice on the format and kind of questions asked...

Interviews are not designed as a form of torture! Interviews are a useful tool to determine if you are capable of making quick and rational decisions that you can explain clearly under pressure. They test your communication skills, enthusiasm and motivation. You should be able to demonstrate that you have thought a lot about medicine and the issues surrounding it.

What the interviewer wants to find out:-

- who you are and what you are doing now;
- why you want to be a doctor / how you made the decision;
- what you have done to find out if medicine is the right career for you;
- what you learnt during your work experience;
- what aspects of the course particularly appeal to you;
- whether you have a realistic understanding of what a career in medicine involves;
- what your other interests are;
- whether you have good communication skills / enjoy working with other people;
- whether you demonstrate an active interest in health/medical issues.

Why do you want to be a Doctor?

Make sure that you have thought carefully about this and give an honest answer, not an answer that someone else has given you. Try to avoid cliches.

There will inevitably be some questions that you have not prepared for, but the important thing with these is to take your time in replying and think carefully before giving an answer. You should be honest and genuine and ask them to re-phrase the question if you do not fully understand what you are being asked.

You should read up on current health-related stories before you go for your interviews. They may ask you to talk about a specific current health topic of your choosing, so make sure that you know about one area in detail. You should think of the pros and cons of common ethical dilemmas such as abortion, euthanasia, etc. and be able to weigh up both sides of an argument.

Remember, you may get asked about information from your UCAS personal statement, so make sure that you can intelligently discuss anything that you claimed to have done or have an interest in. It is therefore very important never to cite an interest in the personal statement with which you are not very familiar. Make sure that you have looked at the website or the prospectus of the university that you are being interviewed at so you can talk knowledgeably about their specific course.

Examples of questions asked at medical school interviews:-
- Why do you want to be a doctor?
- What alternatives have you explored? Why not be a nurse?
- What qualities do you think patients appreciate in a doctor?
- What qualities do you have that would make you a good doctor?
- What are your best / worst qualities?
- Why have you chosen this university? What do you think of our course structure?
- What are your views on public and private medicine and the政府 Foundation Hospitals?
- What is the difference between primary and hospital care?
- What is the National Health Service? What issues are currently predominant within the service?
- How do you see Britain’s healthcare system in 20 years time?
- What single healthcare intervention could change the health of the population the most?
- Will your personal / religious beliefs conflict with your duties as a doctor?
- What is an epidemic?
- Why are we so healthy compared to the Victorians?
- What is the difference between a virus and a bacterium? Against which are antibiotics effective and why?
- What is MRSA and how has it arisen?
- Why is the SARS outbreak so worrying?
- What is homeopathy? Do you approve?
- Do you think / why is research important? What limitations are there to medical research?
- Tell me about something medically related that you have read in the press recently.
- Describe a situation you have been in which was stressful. How do you deal with stress?
- How would you deal with death and the dying?
- What do you think are the advantages / disadvantages of PBL (problem-based learning)?
- What do you think you will find the most difficult about a career in medicine?
- Tell me about your work experience. What did you learn from it?
- Research has shown that ‘integrity’ is an important quality in a doctor. What do you think is meant by this and can you give an example of a situation in which acting with integrity might be important?
- Give an example of when you have worked in a team.
- If complaints were made about you as a doctor how would you respond?
- Do you think that doctors need to ask for consent when taking organs from a dead person? What if it were only a blood sample?
- What have been the most significant advances in medicine in the last 10/20/30 years?

Make sure that you give a good impression by what you wear and the way you act. You must be smartly dressed and well presented; doctors are constantly in contact with the general public and appearance is important. You need to practice looking as professional as possible so go for a safe option, nothing too outrageous! ...
interviewer will ask if you have anything to ask them. Good questions are often ones relating to their specific course that show that you have researched their specific university well and have a genuine interest in their medical school.

However, do not feel that you have to ask a question if all your topics have been covered already. It is often safer to ask no questions at all than to show a lack of research or to repeat things already mentioned in the interview.

Thank the interviewer, smile and say goodbye before you leave the room. It always pays to leave a good impression.