The Match:
What COVID-19 Means for Family Medicine Applicants

The 2021 Match will bring about changes and questions for residency programs and applicants like you. While much of the longstanding advice about matching is still relevant, the AAFP will continue to update and guide you through the process all the way through Match Day.

For family and friends, the Match looks like a one-day event—Match Day. However, for applicants, they must have the Match front and center to navigate the beginning stages of their careers. The process could take a year or longer of planning, applying, and interviewing. The COVID-19 pandemic will undoubtedly force changes for the foreseeable future. Continue to check this document—which you can find by visiting aafp.org/match— for the latest advice, and join your peers in the AAFP’s exclusive online community for student members, where important Match announcements will be posted by AAFP student leadership and staff. To join the community, make sure you’re signed into the AAFP website as a member before accessing it. If you aren’t a member, you can join for free.

What resources does the AAFP offer to help me Match during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The AAFP has helped applicants find and match into family medicine residencies for years. In that regard, we are confident the 2021 Match season will remain the same. In other ways, such as through virtual interactions, the Match process will be altered. We’re ready to help you adapt. For example, our signature conference for medical students and residents will be available virtually in summer 2020. The AAFP also offers two digital matching tools. We recommend them for anyone pursuing family medicine.

**NATIONAL CONFERENCE**

In addition to inspiring programming, the AAFP’s National Conference of Family Medicine Residents and Medical Students hosts the largest gathering of residency programs in one place. To keep participants safe, the conference is online this year from anywhere you are between July 30 and August 1, 2020. Registrants will also have access to all education content for 30 days after the event.

Many students find the residency program they eventually match with at National Conference. There are more than 700 family medicine residency programs in the United States, and more than half of them typically attend. National Conference will offer you the chance to meet program faculty, residents, and directors, and interact with them online. One-on-one virtual appointments will be available. Ask about accommodations that programs are
making for applicants, and what they might be changing about how they interact and review applications. These general questions can help get you started as you meet your future potential colleagues.

STROLLING THROUGH THE MATCH
The AAFP’s Strolling Through the Match guidebook was written specifically to help students explore and match into family medicine. The COVID-19 pandemic won’t change what’s important in selecting a program. Reading the guidebook early in your Match journey can help you formulate a plan to navigate the Match season, explore where you might expect change, and seek additional guidance.

AAFP MOBILE APP: FAMILY MEDICINE MATCH TOOL
The Family Medicine Match Tool—For Students mobile app is an all-season Match resource. Filters allow you to browse programs by geography and more. It’s an easy way to explore your options from home. Within the mobile app, you can save programs you’re interested in, and add notes or photos to the profile. The app comes with a list of suggested questions—these are organized by topic, including obstetrics, global health, and more. Residency programs can add their own descriptions in the app, and the AAFP is asking them to include details that might be relevant for the virtual interviewing season.

What are and how do changes to the 2020-2021 Match timeline affect me?
In May 2020, the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) timeline was updated to reflect the delays students might face collecting and completing application items, such as letters of recommendation and board exams. Here are key dates in the delayed Match timeline:

- **June 8:** MyERAS opens and applicants and can start building their applications.
- **September 1:** Applications can be assigned to programs in the system, but programs won’t be able to review them yet.
- **October 21:** Applications officially open for program review, and programs receive your Medical School Performance Evaluation (MSPE), or “dean’s letter,” from your medical school.

So far, dates for submitting rank order lists, participating in the Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program (SOAP), and Match Day 2021 haven’t changed.

The timeline changes alone won’t necessarily solve every issue you might encounter with the Match process. United States Medical Licensing Examination® (USMLE) Step 2 and Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination of the United States (COMLEX-USA) Level 2 exam dates are being postponed or canceled, along with their rescheduled dates postponed or removed from the schedule altogether. Even having additional weeks before applications are released to programs may not offer you much reassurance.

Due to the discrepancies in exam access this year, the AAFP and partnering family medicine organizations are recommending that family medicine residencies abandon rigid screening protocols that rely on scoring cutoffs. The AAFP and our partnering organizations believe that holistic, equitable review of applications is essential.

Across specialties, it’s expected that medical schools will account for the impact COVID-19 will have on an individual’s application in each MSPE. If you aren’t able to complete required licensing exams in time to apply, make sure your dean’s office know the efforts you’ve made to schedule, reschedule, and take exams. Students who have not completed Step 2 Clinical Skills will no longer be able to complete it prior to the Match. In May 2020, the exam was suspended for at least 12 months. COMPLEX-USA Level 2-PE is suspended through at least September 1, 2020.

How do I show programs I care about family medicine when I haven’t had a clerkship and can’t do an away rotation?
On-site and away rotations have largely been canceled for the foreseeable future. Medical schools should still be working to ensure students have exposure to family medicine experiences, especially at those schools which don’t have a family medicine department. While away rotations are often helpful for students, they haven’t been a requirement in family medicine. You may wish to use your time to explore online electives that help you become a more well-rounded candidate.
Program directors rank commitment to specialty high on their list of desirable qualities in a candidate. Here are ideas to help build experience and give you an authentic perspective of the family medicine specialty:

- Register for the AAFP National Conference of Family Medicine Residents and Medical Students. Attending the conference will help you gain exposure to family medicine, connect with residency programs, add to your curriculum vitae (CV), and share your interest in family medicine with others.

- Search opportunities to get involved as a student leader in a national position or with your AAFP constituent chapter.

- Identify opportunities to connect locally with a Family Medicine Interest Group (FMIG) or other family medicine student club, work with a family physician on a research or scholarly project, and/or participate in a community service initiative run by family physicians (provided you’re comfortable interacting with patients and there are protections to keep you safe from contracting or spreading COVID-19).

**How do I choose residencies if I can’t see them in person?**

You have to choose residencies twice—once when you build a list of programs, and again when your final rank order list is due February 2021. Building a list of programs to explore is exciting, and the basics of the search are still the same. The 2020 summer season before the Match season is the perfect time to focus on this step. Before you search for programs online, first jot down your priorities and career interests.

In section four of the free *Strolling Through the Match* guidebook, the AAFP offers guidance on narrowing your program selections. While the guidebook was written shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, it’s still an extremely relevant and helpful resource to help choose your future path.

Even with the geographic distance between you and residency programs, you can learn a lot about programs from virtual interviews. Factors that help most students choose a program will still be apparent during online interviews when you ask insightful questions, listen intently, and take notes that help you reflect on each interview. Some of the factors you’ll want to consider include a supportive culture, values of program leadership, and personal rapport.

The AAFP’s 2019-2020 student member on the AAFP Board of Directors matched in 2020, and wrote about how the experience might have been better if she had been required to interview virtually.

**What can I expect from virtual interviews?**

Residency programs should interview all candidates virtually this Match season—even local candidates. Virtual interviews have been popular for fellowship interviews, and are used in many non-health care industries. Applying for residency programs isn’t like applying for a typical job, but there are many best practices that students and programs can use to guide them. While it doesn’t extensively cover virtual interviewing, section six of the *Strolling Through the Match* guidebook offers many helpful tips and guidance about interviewing at residency programs.

The format for virtual interviews is likely to vary among programs. At different stages, they could be live conversations, group conversations, or solo interactions. You might also be asked to record yourself responding to a pre-recorded set of questions in some scenarios. Read anything that a program sends you before the interview so you’re prepared, and make sure to research the program online so you don’t spend valuable time asking questions you didn’t need to.

In-person residency interviews would offer you experiences that don’t translate to a computer or phone screen (e.g., coffee or dinner with residents, tour of facilities, and meet and greets with staff and faculty). Hopefully, residency programs will have creative solutions for recreating these experiences virtually, such as teleconferencing with residents over coffee, or hosting a live virtual tour where a program member conducts a virtual walk-through of their facility and answers candidates’ questions live.

You might discover that some of the experiences you will miss (e.g., facility tours) aren’t all that important in deciding which residency program to choose. Missing those experiences might be offset by also missing some of the negative aspects of in-person interviewing. Traveling brings its own stress in terms...
of time and financial commitment, not to mention a safety issue during a viral pandemic. Interviewing in your own surroundings will reduce the stress of being exposed to COVID-19, and might help you feel more relaxed and comfortable when you’re talking with program representatives.

Ask your family medicine department or family medicine interest group to hold mock virtual interviews to help you prepare. You should also attend the AAFP’s virtual National Conference, where you can still interact with hundreds of programs online over the span of a weekend, and start discovering which questions and techniques are most helpful for you.

**How many programs should I apply to?**

A good rule for applicants this year is to only apply to programs you’d have been willing to travel to visit. Section five of the Strolling Through the Match guidebook provides statistics and insight that can help you decide whether to narrow or expand your list. A trusted family medicine advisor or another advisor who knows you and the specialty is another great resource.

If you’re accepted for an interview that you realize later you’d no longer like to keep, it’s best to cancel with a week or more notice.

**How can I manage stress during the Match?**

You’ve already committed years of your life to a demanding, but extremely rewarding career. Family medicine benefits communities like no other medical specialty—we’re not bragging here, it’s true.

That’s why your well-being is the most important consideration for your future. If you need help assessing and protecting your mental health, explore the AAFP’s Physician Health First resources. The AAFP is in your corner when it comes to well-being, as well as advocating for your physical safety as you prepare to train in an uncertain environment.

Lastly, asking mentors or trusted faculty advisors for help or advice when you feel lost or need to talk is also incredibly valuable. Remember, you’re not alone. As you embark on these first steps of what will undoubtedly be a meaningful career in family medicine, remember the quote below. In reflecting on the pressures faced during Match season, as well as the positive impact of family physicians, a resident leader in the AAFP wrote this to students:

> You’re going to be a great doctor. You’re already a great person, and that’s arguably more important. Do not forget it, no matter what happens. Just remember to do the compassionate, thoughtful, generous things that make you you—wherever you are. It’s the family doctor way.

**Stay Informed**

Announcements on changes to the Match:

- The Coalition for Physician Accountability’s Work Group on Medical Students in the Class of 2021 Moving Across Institutions for Post Graduate Training—May 11, 2020
- Coronavirus (COVID-19) and ERAS: FAQs—May 2020
- AAFP Policy: Medical Learner Safety and Wellness During Pandemic Crisis—April 9, 2020
- USMLE Suspending Step 2 Clinical Skills Examination—May 26, 2020

MED2001765