

The Match:

What COVID-19 Means for Family Medicine Applicants

The 2021 Match will be unlike any other. Planning, applying, interviewing, exams, and potentially celebrations, will be altered. As we have in the past, as well as during these unique circumstances, the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) has your back for resources, guidance, and updates about the future of the Match process.

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

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced changes in the 2020-21 residency recruitment, interview, and Match processes. As students prepare for a virtual interview season with likely fewer high-quality clinical experiences or chances to visit residency programs for exploration, family medicine residencies are redesigning their recruitment, interview, and evaluation systems.

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, and the 2021 Match season will be no different.

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Watch workshops from the 2020 AAFP National Conference of Family Medicine Residents and Medical Students for expert advice and answers to FAQs about applying and matching in family medicine:

- [Can You Hear Me Now? Interviewing in the Virtual Age](#)
- [Do's and Don'ts of Residency Interviewing](#)
- [Applying to Residency: From Before Application to After Interview](#)
- [From One IMG to Another](#)

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 now 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 student section of [AAFP 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 the changes to the 2020-2021 Match timeline and how will they 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 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.

WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE A USMLE STEP 2 OR COMLEX-USA LEVEL 2 SCORE BY OCTOBER 21?

Match 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 have been postponed or canceled. Even having additional weeks before applications are released to programs may not offer you much reassurance.

There are a few ways to ensure your application stands out even if you are missing a board exam:

- Ensure your letters of recommendation are clinically relevant, discuss your clinical skills, and that at least one comes from a family physician.
- Show clear involvement in family medicine activities outside your curriculum.
- Share your plan to complete the exam before rank order lists are certified in March. Of family medicine residency directors who responded to a recent AAFP national survey, 94% said they plan to offer interviews this year to students who do not have a Step or Level 2 score at the time of application. However, most programs also indicated they will not rank a candidate with a missing board exam score.
- Reflect your strong test performance by sharing shelf exam scores.
- Address any test taking shortcomings honestly and completely in your personal statement. Share how you've learned and overcome, and how you will approach your missed board exam differently.

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.

HOW CAN I CONNECT WITH PROGRAMS BEFORE I APPLY?

Prior to October 21, many programs are offering informal virtual meet-and-greet events to help potential applicants learn more and explore. The best ways to find these events are to:

- 1) Search for and follow residency programs on Twitter and Instagram. You can also find accounts created by members of the family medicine community that aggregate lists of residencies and their events. The [@aafp_fmig](#) account on Twitter is a resource for getting connected to these aggregate and residency accounts.
- 2) Reach out to local or state AFP chapters to ask about any regional events featuring residencies in the area.

For general information about a residency, it's usually best to check a program's website or entry in the [AAFP Residency Directory](#).

How do I show programs I care about family medicine when I haven't had a clerkship and can't do an away rotation?

This year, many students had on-site and away rotations canceled. 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 or give you an authentic perspective of the family medicine specialty:

- Add family medicine conferences you've attended to your curriculum vitae (CV).
- 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 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.

Based on AAMC data, the majority of applicants in family medicine will not benefit from applying to more than approximately 17 programs. Ultimately, the decision about number of programs to apply to should be based on personal factors. A trusted family medicine advisor or another advisor who knows you and the specialty is another great resource.

A recent national survey of AAFP student members found that most medical students do not plan to apply to more programs than they believe they would have in a year with an in-person recruitment and interview process. Additionally, many programs have indicated they plan to offer more interviews than they could in a typical season.

How do I decide whether or not to accept an interview?

Make sure you've applied only to programs that you have a genuine interest in. Attending virtual events that programs offer before interview season can help you be sure that you'd like to interview there.

Most likely, all invitations you receive will be for virtual interviews. In the rare case you receive an invitation to interview in person, a program should honor a request for a virtual interview instead. The AAFP and others have urged programs only to offer virtual interviews.

It's likely that virtual interviews will have multiple components, including social hours for residents and applicants. Participate in every event offered to you to get a full picture of what life is like at a program.

If you accept 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 do I prepare for virtual interviews?

While it doesn't cover virtual interviewing, section six of the [Strolling Through the Match](#) guidebook offers many helpful tips and guidance about interviewing at residency programs as well as a list of questions by topic area.

Practice can only help you prepare. Ask your family medicine department or family medicine interest group to hold mock virtual interviews to help you prepare.

You should also watch the recordings from the AAFP's National Conference, mentioned above.

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.

Two additional resources to help you prepare for interviews are the AAMC's [Virtual Interviews: Applicant Preparation Guide](#) and [a list of interview questions](#) written by the AAFP's 2019-2020 student member on the AAFP Board of Directors.

What can I expect from virtual interviews?

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.

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.

How do I make decisions about ranking residencies if I can't see them in person?

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](#).

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, ask mentors or trusted faculty advisors for help or advice when you feel lost or need to talk. 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