



EMORY
UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF
MEDICINE

**Center for Holistic
Student Success**

**Step 2 CK Preparation Guide
MD Class of 2025**

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INTRODUCTION

As you begin to study in earnest for the USMLE Step 2 Clinical Knowledge (CK) Exam, choosing the right approach to your studies is important to your success.

Herein are resources and ways of framing your Step 2 studies. Ideally, you will start early with question banks during clinical rotations, but setting up a plan that works for you and adapts between clerkships is not always simple, as time and energy can be limited.

This brief guide is meant to provide an outline, suggested strategies, and answers to frequently asked questions about studying for Step 2 CK. While you should seek out advice from others, you know yourself better than anyone. Devise a study plan that works best for you. The Center for Holistic Student Success is here to help.

This guide is organized according to three basic areas to improve Step 2 performance:

- **Content review** through targeted, interleaving of subjects in a strategic manner.
- **Question Strategy** through analysis of not only what you miss, but why you miss it.
- **Exam Endurance** through practice and simulated testing environments.

Advice from Emory SOM classmates

"I had a dramatically better performance on Step 2 than my Step 1 (using my NBME diagnostics). I attribute that to changing my study style to incorporate all the new resources and technology out there."

"For Step 2, I think the crucial determinate is space repetition throughout the whole M3 year. That could look like a Master Anki deck, or it could look like structured sessions that repeat concepts from previous rotation; but that is the key to building retention and what the majority of my dedicated was focused on."

PREPARING FOR STEP 2 CK

Multiple references are listed below; however, it is important to **limit the number of resources you use to 2-3**. Additional resources quickly become overwhelming and can contribute to anxiety and lack of focus. We also know there are less Step 2 resources available than there are for Step 1. As such, choosing the best resources for you is important. As you review the following resource options, we have included advice from fellow Emory School of Medicine students to help guide your study strategy formulation.

EXAM STRUCTURE

Step 2 CK is a one-day examination divided into eight 60-minute blocks and administered in one 9-hour testing session. The number of questions per block never exceeds 40. The total number of exam questions will not exceed 318. For students with testing accommodations with extra time, the exam will be split into two days.

Step 2 CK assesses an examinee's ability to apply medical knowledge, skills, and understanding of clinical science essential for the provision of patient care under supervision and includes emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention. Step 2 CK ensures that due attention is devoted to principles of clinical sciences and basic patient-centered skills that provide the foundation for the safe and competent practice of medicine under supervision (USMLE, 2022).

Table 1: Step 2 CK System Specifications*

System	Range, %
General Principles of Foundational Science**	2-4
Immune System	3-5
Blood & Lymphoreticular System	4-6
Behavioral Health	6-8
Nervous System & Special Senses	6-8
Musculoskeletal System/Skin & Subcutaneous Tissue	6-10
Cardiovascular System	8-10
Respiratory System	7-9
Gastrointestinal System	7-9
Renal & Urinary System & Male Reproductive	4-6
Pregnancy, Childbirth & the Puerperium	4-6
Female Reproductive System & Breast	4-6
Endocrine System	4-6
Multisystem Processes & Disorders	4-6
Biostatistics & Epidemiology/Population Health/Interpretation of Medical Literature	3-5
Social Sciences: Legal/Ethical Issues & Professionalism/Systems-based Practice & Patient Safety	10-15

* Percentages are subject to change at any time.

** The Step 2 CK General Principles category includes normal and abnormal processes that are not limited to specific organ systems.

APPLYING FOR ACCOMMODATIONS

If you are applying for Step 2 accommodations, please reach out to Dr. Christen Hairston (christen.hairston@emory.edu) ASAP to begin the process. Dr. Hairston can sign your Confirmation of Previous Accommodation form and assist you in reviewing your essay and materials. For more information on USMLE Step 2 CK accommodations, see [USMLE accommodation website](#).

Advice from Emory SOM classmates applying for Accommodations.

"Get your paperwork together earlier than you think you need to!"

"You will submit your request when you submit your 3-month time slot request...however, you want your paperwork ready well ahead of this because you might find out you need new neuropsychology or psychoeducational testing, other road bumps, etc."

"If you received accommodations for step 1, the process for renewal of the accommodations is much easier and faster."

"If you receive accommodations over two days, [it is possible] you will need to call in directly to schedule your 2 dates to take the exam. The 2 days do not have to be directly back-to-back, but they do need to be at the same site."

CONTENT REVIEW

When approaching Step 2 CK studying, identify your areas of greatest strength and weakness. For some clerkships, you may need to review intensive content; for others, merely using Qbank review will help you recall and reinforce. For those areas that require content review, the following section offers popular resources.

This guide is not an endorsement of one product over another; nor should one believe that the higher the price, the higher the quality. These are merely popular resources that have helped students to see success, and we are providing them to guide you in your choices. Pricing is provided in green.

Access Medicine

<http://pid.emory.edu/chkns>

FREE subscription through Emory Health Science Library

Access Medicine is not only a resource to over fifty medical texts, but it also contains study tools with review questions, flashcards, and play Showdown! Create an account to access the study tools which are located under *Study Tools* tab. Emory has subscriptions for AccessSurgery, AccessEmergencyMedicine, and AccessPhysiotherapy.

AMBOSS

<https://www.amboss.com/us>

\$10.75/month billed yearly; \$14.99/month billed monthly; Free 5-day trial available

Includes content review using unlimited library access, Anki add-on and smart study tools, as well as interactive medical imaging with overlays. Includes “phrasionary, table quizzes, charts, radiological images with overlays, videos, SmartZoom samples and other images that illustrate key points on different topics” all on a digital platform.”

Anki Flashcards

<https://apps.ankiweb.net/>

Android version free; iOS version \$25

Some students use flashcards extensively, and others never use them. For those who benefit from flashcards (e.g., a quick review of material prior to bedtime or first thing in the morning) this is a popular option—Zanki Step 2 CK is an option for Step 2, the flashcard version of First Aid.

Advice from Emory SOM classmates

“I also want to specify that Anki is not as necessary for Step 2. Do it if you like it, but do not feel like you need to force yourself to use it.”

“I also used the Anki AnKing deck for my missed UWorld questions. I would unuspend cards related to the information I would have needed to know to have answered the question correctly. I didn’t spend more than 20 mins a day on Anki cards.”

Boards and Beyond

<https://www.boardsbeyond.com/>

Subscriptions range from \$24.00 for one week to \$399.00 for 2 years.

Step 2 CK resource includes 260 videos, PDF copies of the slides and Qbank of 1300 questions. Covers content review and Qbank with one subscription.

Divine Intervention Podcast

<https://divineinterventionpodcasts.com/category/usmle-step-2-ck/>

Offered as a FREE Podcast

Focuses on high yield concepts. This podcast allows you to choose specific topics to supplement learning deficits. Because it is a podcast, it can be listened to during commutes, while running errands, or even during exercise.

FREE Crowd-Sourced transcripts of these podcasts have been written by medical students such as yourselves and can be found online at the Divine Intervention website: <https://divineinterventionpodcasts.com/notes/>. The list of podcasts broken down by subject is also found at this website.

Divine Intervention Step 1, 2, and/or 3 Test Taking Strategy Courses

<https://divineinterventionpodcasts.com/>

Multiple options are available at **various** prices.

Focuses on high yield concepts through an interactive class format via zoom. He offers Step 1-3 courses, Step 2/3 and one for Step 1 only.

Dr. High Yield

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0Asdp7ukEshW7sZgC27EtA/videos>

FREE

High yield YouTube videos covering topics including IM, Peds, OBGYN, Surgery and Psych. There are books you can purchase that go alongside the videos or potentially find online crowd-sourced written transcripts for some of these videos.

Advice from Emory SOM classmates

"Absolutely listen to this series [Dr. High Yield] as a review the week before your Step 2 CK exam, you will not regret it. He explains things in a concise way and is now comparable with Emma Holiday on the level of usefulness. You can choose to use these right before the shelves as well as in the beginning of your dedicated as a high-yield baseline."

Emma Holliday Videos

<https://willpeachmd.com/emma-holliday-lectures>

FREE

Videos of physician Emma Holliday, MD who provides high yield videos on certain Step 2 topics. This website also includes PDF slides and even Anki cards if you find these useful for your learning style.

Advice from Emory SOM classmates

"I strongly recommend Emma Holiday videos (underrated resource) for reviewing the material before your shelves or before starting dedicated. These are 2-hour interactive lectures going through all the content you need to know for surgery, IM, pediatrics, and psych. If you can just do one, do the IM one (My score went up 30 points just by watching and studying the internal medicine one). Strongly recommend if you consider yourself a big picture person and would like a good baseline before diving into detailed questions (which are great but they def give you a fragmented understanding of the material)."

First Aid for the USMLE 2 CK

(Book)

Approximately \$25 to rent; \$40-\$65 to buy; available used starting at \$10.

The book is separated into three sections:

Section 1: Guide to Efficient Exam Preparation

Section 2: Database of High-Yield Facts

Section 3: Top-Rated Review Resources

Kaplan

<https://www.kaptest.com/usmle>

Prep Course on Demand \$1199; Live Online \$3999; New York In-Center \$7499

Options videos, quizzes, "warm-up and post-test questions," 2 simulated exams and accompanying lecture notes. See Qbanks below for additional Kaplan Step 2 CK offerings.

Pathoma

<http://www.pathoma.com/>

PathomaFree version is free and does not include the textbook or all videos.

PathomaPro starts at \$84.95 and offers the textbook, and 3-, 12-, or 21-month subscriptions to videos for every chapter of the book.

While Pathoma offers a Step 1 review, they do not offer a formal Step 2 CK review. This resource covers high-yield pathology information for all organ systems in shorter videos. For those who prefer, reading the *Pathoma* textbook may be faster than reviewing the videos. The textbook has many color images like those on Step 1 and 2. Often considered an essential resource.

SketchyMedical

<https://sketchymedical.com/>

\$299.99 for 6 months; \$399.99 for 12 months; \$599.99 for 24 months

A visual mnemonic series for microbiology, pathology, and pharmacology. Sketchy "helps you create a memory palace by associating medical topics with memorable visual elements."

QUESTION BANKS (QBanks)

As an advanced medical student, you are familiar with the value of question banks to improve your test taking strategy. Recognizing effective Step 2 studying is both an art and science, Qbanks are helpful in identifying areas of need for you as a learner.

Working with the Center for Holistic Student Success, we seek to help students use the tools below to refine their ability to: (1) identify what the question is asking, (2) identify distractors, (3) work through the best possible answer, (4) choose it and (5) move on. The following Qbanks are popularly used for Step 2 CK.

AMBOSS

<https://www.amboss.com/us>

Full Qbank access is in addition to the monthly membership; (\$149) for one month; (\$189) for three months; (\$229) for six months, (\$299) for twelve months.

Over 3150+ Step 2 CK questions and corresponding articles.

BoardVitals

<https://www.boardvitals.com/>

Subscriptions are available for 1 (\$159), 3 (\$219), or 6 (\$359) months.

Over 1400 USMLE Step 2 board review practice questions with explanations available. Create an account to access test banks to create customized practice tests and review advanced statistics.

Kaplan

<https://www.kaptest.com/usmle>

QBank - 1 month (\$159); 3 month (\$199); 6 month (\$299); 12 month (\$399)

USMLE-Rx

<https://www.usmle-rx.com/>

QMax (2300 questions) - 1 month (\$59); 3 months (\$99); 6 months (\$169); 12 months (\$199); 24 months (\$229)

Question bank for Step 2 CK by the authors of *First Aid*.

UWorld

www.uworld.com

30-day (\$319), 90-day (\$439), 180-day (\$479) or 360-day (\$559) subscriptions

- Identify ways to gain optimal benefit from this essential resource. UWorld Step 2 CK builds upon your Step 1-tested knowledge with a greater focus on clinical skills, patient-centered care, disease prevention, and clinical science.
- Integrate high yield topics gleaned from *UWorld* questions and reading answer explanations into your own list of high-yield topics for additional review (i.e., Anki cards, *First Aid* annotation, excel documents or other creative way you have identified).
- Review incorrect questions. Should you read the explanation for each answer option for every question? For the sake of efficiency, probably not. Rather, read the explanation for any answer option you get wrong, "guessed right" or considered as possibly correct.
- Plan to do a set amount of questions/day during dedicated study time. While it is true that there is an advantage to completing as many questions as possible, be sure not to rush through questions at the expense of learning from the questions.

- Reflect on your strengths and weaknesses - be sure to take the time to review what you have learned from them.

Advice from Emory SOM classmates

"Aim to complete all the UWorld questions during your third year, so when it is time for dedicated, you can reset the bank. The subjects for the Step 2 Review question banks on UWorld are Medicine, OBGYN, Pediatrics, Psychiatry, and Surgery."

"The shelf review question bank has a slightly different way to categorizing these questions and includes Neurology. Do all the UWorld questions for the specific rotation you are in (i.e., when you are on the Surgery rotation, do all of the Surgery questions.) This will also be helpful for studying for shelf."

"To my knowledge, some rotations including Adult Primary Care and Pediatrics have an Aquifer exam at the end instead of a shelf. You should still make sure to do all of the questions during your rotation even if it an Aquifer exam. It will help you solidify your knowledge. I would alternate between doing my questions in tutor mode and not in tutor mode."

BUILDING YOUR EXAMINATION ENDURANCE

Taking practice tests is the best way to improve your endurance for a 9-hour exam. One consideration is the endurance of sitting. Since joining your clinical rotations, you are less in the habit of sitting for prolonged periods. As such, you will need to rebuild your endurance.

We recommend:

- Take one practice exam at the beginning of the study period plus 2-3 additional practice exams during the study period. Strategically place them to optimize and not deflate your experience.
- To improve endurance, wake up every day and study at the time you'll take the exam. It will help you feel mentally awake and prepared for the early rise.

NBME Shelf Exams (\$20)

(<https://www.nbme.org/examinees/nbme-self-assessments/clinical-mastery-series>)

Especially consider for clerkships where you took an Aquifer exam. Shelf exams can help you prepare for Step 2 content areas. Shelf self-assessments available in the following subjects:

- | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Clinical Neurology | • Obstetrics and Gynecology |
| • Emergency Medicine | • Pediatrics |
| • Family Medicine | • Psychiatry |
| • Medicine | • Surgery |

Multiple Question Blocks. Use QBank blocks one after the other with breaks simulating the testing environment. (Included in whatever QBank you choose)

UWorld. 4 blocks of forty question practice exam. (Get 1 test with 90-day access; 2 tests with 180-day and 360-day options)

CCSSA. NBME's Comprehensive Clinical Science Self-Assessment (CCSSA) (\$60): *Please note that Emory School of Medicine is providing one CCSSA in person.*

Kaplan. Kaplan offers a 3-hour free diagnostic exam. (Free)

USMLE Practice Examination. (\$75)

(https://apps.nbme.org/CBTPSRegistrationWeb/jsp/usmle_CBTPS_registration.jsp)

NBME Free 120 (FREE)

(<https://orientation.nbme.org/Launch/USMLE/STPF2>)

Step 2 Considerations

The weight of your Step 2 score. We recognize that with Step 1 going pass/fail, Step 2 CK now has greater weight than ever before for residency applications. Depending on your preferred specialty, this can be a source of great distress. Please make sure you learn from residency directors and program open houses as to the average score accepted by programs. This will help guide you on your goal score.

Practice test quantity and timing. Plan to take a couple of practice tests - some students take more. Completing the test at the standard pace allows you to practice getting through the exam in the time allotted. Taking a practice test at the midpoint period gives you a sense of where you are in terms of preparation, serving as a diagnostic tool to identify areas of strength and weakness, which may help you to adjust your schedule during the remainder of your study period.

Reviewing material repeatedly through questions also helps to consolidate information and helps with retention. A low score may lead to undue anxiety while a high score may contribute to a false sense of security. Do not get fixated on your score! Practice exams help with endurance and time management skills as well as feedback on areas of need. The score matters in terms of seeing progress but be mindful that you are on a journey of improvement. With each practice, you are moving forward towards your ultimate goal of success.

Step 2 CK is a test of endurance. There are eight one-hour blocks of 40 (or fewer) questions; nine hours are allotted to complete the test. The total number of questions will not exceed 318. Forty-five minutes of break time is automatically allocated. In addition to the exam blocks, the test begins with a 15-minute computer tutorial. However, the tutorial is identical to the one online - <https://orientation.nbme.org/Launch/USMLE/STPF2>. It is best to skip it on test day and take those 15 minutes as additional break time. This allows you to begin with 1 hour of break time, which you may take between sections at any point during the day. Also, if you finish an exam block early, the remaining time is added to your break time.

Some complete a couple of sections at a time and then take a prolonged break, while others choose to take a five-minute break at the end of each section. Do not let the hours of testing wear you out. Do all those smart test-taking things (bring [and eat] snacks, use your break time, etc.). Give each question consideration, but if you are unsure, pick an answer and move on or skip the question and plan to return to it. A subsequent question may help to trigger the answer to a previous question that you skipped. Remember that there may be what you find to be easier questions at the end of the block – and you do not want to run out of time.

Practice environment. You may want to consider taking a practice test at the Prometric test site. Details are at <https://proscheduler.prometric.com/scheduling/testInformation>. Within your 90-day eligibility period, Prometric offers a practice session with a brief tutorial section and three 1-hour blocks of approximately forty multiple-choice test items each. Upon completion a printed percentage correct score is provided. The opportunity to become familiar with the testing site may help decrease anxiety on the test day. Contact your local Prometric Testing Center for costs.

STUDY SCHEDULES + FINDING BALANCE AMID THE STRESS

Study schedules. Following a study schedule will help you to stay on track. That said, you may not reach all the goals you set out to meet in the beginning. Be flexible, adapt throughout, do not beat yourself up and move on. Include several flex-days for “catch-up” or more time on a particular topic. Allow more time for review towards the end of dedicated study time – reviewing material helps with retention and more rapid recall during the exam itself. It is easy to get stressed if you get behind schedule and to ignore the importance of food, sleep, exercise, family, and friends. A daily routine helps to maintain sanity and decrease burnout.

- Additional tips and sample study schedules are at <https://firstaidteam.com/schedules/>. (Free)
- Many students also like Blueprint's Med School Study Planner (formerly Cram Fighter) for a daily Step 2 study schedule.
1 month (\$29/month); 3 months (\$60); 6 months (\$95); 12 months (\$119). (<https://blueprintprep.com/medical/med-school/study-schedule>). You enter all the resources you will use, the time you have before the test, and it gives you a daily schedule. If you do not finish something in one day, it rolls over and updates daily.
- Your mentors and student success resources can support you in outlining your Step 2 schedule for dedicated as well as throughout the curriculum.

Some examples of Study Schedules from the Class of 2023 and 2024
[Step 2 CK Panelists' Study Strategy 2.7.2023](#)

Ordering topics. Begin with your weaker topics and schedule accordingly, allowing more time for these topics.

Balancing time on subjects. Schedule more time to review those topics which tend to be more heavily emphasized on the exam. Please review page 4 of this document for an outline of the percentage represented by discipline.

Follow your energy flow. Schedule the most challenging part of your study day when you are most alert (i.e., if you are a morning or evening person, please schedule accordingly).

Focus on mental well-being. Schedule therapy check-in sessions, ensure that you are connecting with others, and remember that you are the vessel taking this exam. The more well you are, the better you can perform. CAPS, Student Health Psychiatry, as well as community providers are all here to support you.

Study environment. Find a good place (or places) to study. What setting is least distracting and absent of anxiety-triggers? Home, library, school, coffee shop, etc. Connect with your fellow classmates to create optimal, supportive study environments.

Silence your cell phone. Turning off all phone and computer notifications will aid in your ability to concentrate. Plan to check your phone and email at specified times as part of your study schedule.

Do not be an island. Humans need connection and dedicated study time can be very isolating. Make sure that you are engaging with others in some way throughout the entire dedicated study time.

Study partners. Many students benefit from a study partner. Plan, for example, to meet with a classmate to review a topic, ask one another questions, present a topic to one-another, etc. Find a whiteboard and give “lectures” to one another.

Time off from studying. A study schedule **must** include study breaks – time off makes for more effective study. Take at least one full day off a week (e.g., one full day, two mornings, or two afternoons). Schedule a five-minute break at least every 45 minutes as this simulates the testing scenario. Go outside for breaks, when possible, to get fresh air and sunshine. During a break, remove yourself from any study materials and do your best to truly relax – no flash cards or podcasts on the treadmill. It is better to study 8 “good hours” than 12 “non-productive hours;” respect your limit and stop studying. Continue to do all the things that keep us healthy—exercise, meditation, hydration, nourishing food, and sunshine.

Sleep. Get on a sleep schedule that will model the wake time on test day. Practice like you play.

Comparing self to others. There will always be someone studying more than you (and less than you). While you should listen to the advice of others, you best know yourself and the way you are most productive studying. Do not be stressed by how other people are studying - be confident and do what works best for you. Extending your study time in an unreasonable fashion is counterproductive.

Step 2 CK Scheduling Permit. You must bring the scheduling permit you receive in an email from the NBME to the Prometric testing site on the day of the exam. (Be sure to open the link and print the actual scheduling permit). You will be expected to present this permit along with an unexpired, government-issued photo identification with your signature (e.g., current driver’s license). **Your name on the photo ID must exactly match the name appearing on the scheduling permit.**

Additional study time. Avoid the urge to push back the test date. There comes a point in time where additional study is counterproductive. Although the thought of an additional week of study time may be tempting, be confident in your ability and in the effectiveness of your study schedule. Changing the test date can negatively impact your confidence and contribute to anxiety. You will never feel totally prepared; most students “peak” at 5-6 weeks. If you are considering moving your exam due to feeling unprepared, please reach out to Dr. Hairston to discuss.

Reach out to your Emory School of Medicine Resources. You are not alone in this journey; it takes a village, and we are here to support you! Please feel free to reach out to Dr. Christen Hairston, Associate Dean of Student Success; Dr. Stacy Higgins Associate Dean of Student Affairs, Clinical Services, your Small Group Advisor, Dr. Gordon Churchward, Assistant Dean for Medical Education and Student Affairs, Dr. Ira Schwartz, Associate Dean, Medical Education and Student Affairs and/or Dr. Bill Eley, Executive Associate Dean of Medical Education and Student Affairs for support. If you have any questions about this guide or need support in connecting to Step 2 resources.

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