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Selection Alliance

Can you go to medical school if you have...?

A guide for prospective medical school applicants with disabilities or long-term health conditions



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A guide for prospective medical school applicants with disabilities or long-term health conditions

Medical students with disabilities are welcomed and valued by UK medical schools. People with experience of disability are uniquely positioned to understand the impact of disability on their lives and the lives of others. Medicine overall benefits from these perspectives as it strives to represent the society from which it is drawn and will serve.

Under UK law a person is disabled if they have a long-term condition (one that lasts over a year) that impacts on their day-to-day life including their ability to study. Using this definition, the following conditions are considered to be disabilities:

- Physical disabilities such as mobility issues or hearing impairments.
- Long term health conditions like diabetes or ulcerative colitis
- Mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression
- Specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia
- Recurring or fluctuating conditions such as multiple sclerosis (MS)

Key messages

Can you go to medical school if you have a disability or long-term health condition?

The answer is probably yes; in most cases, the adjustments can be made to enable you to study at medical school.

There are rules about the types of things you need to be able to do to graduate from medical school. These include professional skills such as communicating effectively with patients and practical skills such as taking a blood sample. These outcomes are designed to ensure doctors can provide effective and safe patient care. In most cases the adjustments you need can be made to help you meet these, including adjustments that are specific to being in a learning setting. Medical schools will be able to support the vast majority of students to meet these requirements.

Most adjustments are easily managed at all stages of the medicine degree. However, when you go to placements there may be some limitations in terms of physical adjustments or the provision of specialist equipment depending on the placement environment. Medical schools will of course work with placement providers to ensure that this is a rare circumstance. Medical schools also work with a wide range of placement providers, and it may be that some adjustments can be provided in one provider that cannot be made in another. Medical schools will however ensure you receive a well-rounded placement experience that will allow you meet your learning outcomes.

While medical schools will do everything they can to help you complete the course you should be aware that in some, very limited circumstances, the adjustments you have had in medical schools may not be available when you start work. This is due to the difference between a learning and working setting, and the different policies and laws applied in employment settings and the different levels of resources available. Medical schools will support you in understanding if this might be the case for you and will ensure there is engagement with postgraduate educators and employers to support your transition into practice.

It may be that your condition will influence your choice of career pathway

or specialty but there will be dedicated support for you in doing so. More information on the variety of specialities and jobs is available on the [NHS Health Careers websites](#).

Key points to take from this guidance:

- Many people with disabilities/health conditions can study and practise medicine. Disability is considered separately during the selection process; any impact your condition may or not may not have on your ability to study medicine will only be considered once you have been made an offer to study medicine.
- Reasonable adjustments like extra time may be available in all parts of the selection process from aptitude tests to interviews. Medical Schools are happy to be consulted on this.
- Declaring your disability is encouraged. The earlier you declare a disability/health condition or let the medical schools you are applying to know you require reasonable adjustments to the selection process, the better the support will be.
- If you are worried about the impact your condition might have on your ability to study medicine, get in touch with medical schools you are interested in attending for advice and guidance.
- In a very small number of cases, adjustments that medical schools are able to make may not be available when you start working in the NHS.

Introduction

This guidance has been developed by the Medical Schools Council Selection Alliance to provide advice and guidance to disabled applicants to medical school. It has been developed with input from occupational health physicians, disability staff working in medical schools, admissions leads, medical students, the British Medical Association (BMA) and the General Medical Council (GMC). The contents complement the GMC's [Welcomed and valued guidance](#) which explains how disabled students and doctors should be supported across the continuum of medical education and training.

Defining disability

There are lots of different medical conditions that are defined as disabilities under UK law. Often people with these conditions may not think of themselves as disabled but recognise that they may need adjustments to help them fulfil their potential.

Under [UK law](#) a person is disabled if they have a long term condition (one that lasts over a year) that impacts on their day to day life including their ability to study. Using this definition, the following conditions are considered to be disabilities:

- Physical disabilities such as mobility issues or hearing impairments
- Long term health conditions like diabetes or ulcerative colitis
- Mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression
- Specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyspraxia
- Recurring or fluctuating conditions such as multiple sclerosis (MS)

When filling out the disability section of the UCAS form, if you are not sure if your condition qualifies as a disability, get in touch with the medical schools and/or disability services of the university you are intending to apply to. Medical schools monitor enquiries to ensure that they pick up queries from disabled applicants and will be happy to help you, so do highlight what information you need.

When filling out the disability section of the UCAS form, if you are not sure if your condition qualifies as a disability, get in touch with the medical schools and/or disability services of the university you are intending to apply to. Medical schools monitor enquiries to ensure that they pick up queries from disabled applicants and will be happy to help you, so do highlight what information you need.

Medical schools are required by UK law to make reasonable adjustments to minimise any disadvantage a student might have that arises from their disability so that the student can participate fully in their degree. There are three main types of adjustments that can be made:

- Changes to practice or policy – an example of this would be providing a disabled person with extra time to complete an assessment because their disability means they will take longer to read the exam questions.
- Changes to the physical environment – an example of this would be installing a ramp as well as steps so that students with mobility impairments can access a lecture theatre.
- Providing additional equipment – an example of this would be providing an electronic stethoscope so that a student with a hearing impairment is able to listen for heart sounds.

It is never too early to seek advice from medical schools

If you are considering applying to medical school but you are worried that your disability or health condition will impact on your ability to study or practise medicine, then the best thing to do is get in touch with a medical school. This can be the one nearest to you or the one you think you might like to attend.

There are a few things medical schools may be able to do to help you decide if medicine is the right career for you:

- They could put you in touch with the university or medical school disability support service so you can get their advice and thoughts.
- They could provide opportunities for you to access occupational health services so you understand what reasonable adjustments they would recommend you need to study medicine.

- They could give you a taste of medical school life by letting you attend a session in the skills lab. This would allow you to see what medical students do and think about what support you might need to perform the activities required.
- They could support you in finding work experience which will allow you to get a sense of what being a doctor with a disability might be like.
- They could put you in touch with current and former students who have a disability so you can learn from their experiences of what it is like to study medicine and be a doctor with a disability.

If you attend a medical school open day, it is a good idea to ask how specific things that are impacted by your disability are usually organised, eg classroom teaching routines, assessment structures, placement locations and overall timetables. You may find that many of your disability-related needs are already accommodated within the school's standard offering. You should also ask to speak to the disability support service to get a sense of the additional support they might be able to provide you.

Although all medical schools will be able and willing to support you to study with them, their individual course and placement structures, teaching/assessment strategies, support services and campus facilities can all differ substantially. You therefore need to be mindful that your needs may be met in different ways at different medical schools eg a facility that you will need to use might be provided as a reasonable adjustment to those that need it at one medical school but a similar facility may be more freely available to all students at a different school. Some medical schools may also have a placement schedule or day to day routine that more naturally aligns with your health needs than others.

Seeking this type of advice and guidance will not have an impact on any subsequent application you make to that medical school. These interventions are purely to support your decision to apply to medical school and are not used in judgement on whether you will be accepted onto the course.

It is important to let medical schools know you have a disability

Medical schools want to support you if you have a disability or long-term health condition, but they can only do this if they know about your condition. You can declare a disability at a number of stages during the application process:

- In your application form on UCAS
- If you are invited to interview or other selection activity
- If you are made an offer by the medical school
- On enrolment at medical school
- During a routine occupational health screening on starting medical school
- Once your course has begun
- If you become disabled during your time at medical school

As well as allowing you to bring a valuable lived experience to the study of medicine, declaring your disability is also a positive way of showing you understand the professional requirements of being a doctor and the importance of having insight into how your disability might impact on your studies. The MSC and the GMC provide guidance on professional behaviour for medical students in the document [Achieving good medical practice](#). In this guidance it says:

‘As a medical student, you must tell your medical school about any serious health problems, or any aspect of your health or personal circumstances that could affect your training (especially your placements) or your relationship with colleagues. This is so that your medical school can support you, and it can only do this if it knows that you have a problem.

Telling your medical school shows you have insight into the impact your condition may have on patients, your fellow students and yourself. This is a crucial factor that medical schools consider in relation to health and fitness to practise.’

The best time to declare a disability or ask for reasonable adjustments is at the application stage, for instance in your UCAS form. This alerts medical schools at the earliest opportunity that you might require adjustments to the selection process. For example, if you declare your disability in the application stage, then the medical school can give you the opportunity to request adjustments when they invite you to interview.

Disability is not considered in the selection process

Although the medical school may know that you have a disability, they will not consider this in making the decision as to whether to make you an offer. Interviewers and those looking at your personal statement will not know you have a disability unless you have chosen to write about it in your personal statement or your disability is noticeable in face-to-face situations. Even if the interviewer or person reviewing your personal statement is aware of your disability, they will not take it into account in the assessment they make of your application.

The potential impact of your disability on your ability to study will only be considered once you have been made a formal offer to study medicine.

The selection process

This section goes through the selection process highlighting the issues that disabled applicants should be aware of and giving examples of the type of support that is available at each stage. It will also point you in the right direction for relevant general advice from the Medical Schools Council Selection Alliance for each part of the process.

Relevant experience needed to study medicine

Most applicants think of this as work experience but in fact the range of experiences that can be used in your application to medical school are much wider than what is traditionally considered as work experience.

Paid employment and volunteer work can be as, if not more, useful in applying for medical school than experiences of shadowing doctors. Medical schools want you to demonstrate you can learn from experience, whatever it is. For all applicants some clinical work experience can be helpful to give you an understanding of the physical and emotional experience of being a doctor but it is not essential.

More information on relevant experience to study medicine:

- [Guidance on relevant experience for applying to medical school](#)

- [Values and attributes needed to study medicine](#)
- [Work experience infosheet](#)

Academic attainment

All medical schools will use academic criteria to make the decision as to whether to offer you a place, be these school, university, or admission test grades. It is important to note that if you received adjustments such as extra time in these exams, the medical school will have no knowledge of this. It is also important to realise that just because you had adjustments such as extra time previously, this will not automatically be carried across to your medical school. Reasonable adjustments are made according to your current needs and must also be reasonable in the context of studying medicine specifically. That is, an adjustment that removes or changes a required learning outcome of the course would not be considered reasonable. You will be reassessed if and when you become a student to be sure your adjustments meet your needs.

More information on academic attainment:

- [Entry requirements infosheet](#)
- [Entry requirements for UK medical schools](#)

Aptitude tests

Aptitude tests are additional assessments required by many medical schools to see if individuals have the potential to study medicine. The three main aptitude tests used in the UK are UCAT, BMAT and GAMSAT (the latter is only used for graduates). All aptitude test providers can offer adjustments to the test for disabled candidates. Commonly requested [adjustments](#) such as extra time, rest breaks and coloured paper are given as examples on the various test providers' websites. To receive an adjustment to the test you will need to provide the test provider with medical evidence of your condition and its impact on your studies. Please refer to individual websites for details of what they require.

There may be exceptional circumstances where test providers are unable to make an adjustment you feel you require. If this is the case, please contact the medical schools you intend to apply to as they will have a policy in

place to cover these situations. In these situations, you will still be able to have your application considered.

If you have concerns about how a test provider came to a decision about the adjustments you require, please contact the medical schools you have or intend to apply to as they will be able to contact the test provider to investigate the situation.

More information on test providers:

- [UCAT](#)
- [BMAT](#)
- [GAMSAT](#)
- [UCAT Infosheet](#)
- [BMAT Infosheet](#)

Personal statements

Personal statements are used in a variety of different ways by medical schools. Most do not score them (and some do not read them at all) but they may be used as a basis for a question in an interview. Bearing this in mind you should be aware that if you put information about your disability in your personal statement, your interviewer will be aware of this, however they will not use this knowledge to make a decision on the score they give you.

There is no obligation for you to put any information about your disability or long-term health condition in your personal statement. However, if you want to and feel comfortable doing so, you are free to talk about your condition in your personal statement. Many disabled students gain valuable experiences of health care professionals, settings and treatments due to their disability, and reflection on this in your statement can be an asset.

Although medical schools may read personal statements, they are not the correct way to disclose to the medical school that you have a disability. Instead you should use the appropriate section of the UCAS form or other application forms covering disability to ensure the medical school is

informed.

More information on personal statements:

- [Personal statement infosheet](#)

Academic reference

Your school or college will be asked to complete an academic reference as part of the UCAS application process. Although not all medical schools read academic statements, schools are encouraged to tell medical schools about any social or educational disadvantages applicants have experienced as some do check for this. You may wish to discuss with your school whether you would like them to disclose your disability in this reference.

The inclusion of any information about your disability should be at your request and we would not expect to see teachers commenting on the impact your disability may have on your ability to study. This is a decision for medical schools to make independently and they will not use your reference for this purpose.

More information on academic references:

- [Advice to teachers and careers advisors; the UCAS application](#)

Interviews

UK medical schools use different types of interviews, and you can find out more about interviews on our [interview preparation site](#).

Adjustments may be available for interviews. Common examples that medical schools may provide include:

- Extra time
- Rest breaks
- Different coloured paper
- Fully accessible venues

Your interviewers may not be aware that you have a disability but even if it is apparent or available in your personal statement, they have been trained to not consider disability in the scores they decide upon.

More information on interviews:

- [Interview Infosheet](#)
- [MSC Interview Preparation Tool](#)

Getting an offer

Most offers made by medical schools are conditional on you achieving the required academic grades. Most medical schools will also make the offer on condition that you pass a criminal record check from the Disclosure and Barring Service and complete a routine health screening process. These will take place once you have accepted the offer from the medical school.

A health screening process is designed to ensure that all students receive the help they need and that the medical school can prepare for the student's arrival. As part of the process, you may correspond with dedicated medical school staff or even be offered an appointment with an occupational health physician to help assess what reasonable adjustments you might need to complete the course successfully. Medical schools may also start to put in place a package of support, including contact with disability support services that will continue once you join the course. More information on supporting students once they are on the course is available in the GMC guidance [Welcomed and valued](#).

In some rare instances the medical school might be concerned that you will be unable to meet the required outcomes for graduates. These are outcomes set by the GMC that every student must meet before they can qualify. Medical schools can make reasonable adjustments to assist you in meeting the outcomes, but they cannot exempt you from anything in the outcomes. Outcomes are competency standards; something everyone who wants to be a doctor must meet. Examples of adjustments that can be made to meet outcomes include:

- Students must be able to carry out a basic respiratory examination which may involve listening to a patient's chest. A student with a hearing impairment may be able to use an electronic stethoscope to allow them to meet this outcome.
- There are written exams which allow students to demonstrate they have met the knowledge requirements set out in the outcomes. A student with dyslexia may be given extra time to complete these assessments.

If the medical school is concerned that you will not be able to meet the outcomes, they are likely to put together an expert panel to assess whether

this is the case. The panel may include occupational health physicians, clinical educators and disability support services. You may be asked to try out adjustments such as new pieces of equipment to see if these will help you meet the outcomes. The panel will then consider all the evidence and come to a decision as to whether you can start the course.

Your medical school will support you through this process. They can also offer advice and guidance on other courses and careers that might interest you if the decision is that you will be unable to meet the outcomes.

Remember that medical schools are not looking for reasons to stop you from doing their course. They start from a position of wanting to support you to succeed, no matter what your individual needs are, and will do their best to find solutions to allow you to meet the outcomes. It is vitally important that you help them by engaging with this process.

Once you meet the conditions of your offer

Once you get your exam results and have passed your health screening and criminal record check there will be a period before you start medical school. During this period medical schools and their associated disability support services will be preparing to receive you on the course. If they need to order specialist equipment or arrange adapted accommodation, this is when they will be doing this. It is important that you engage with this process so that everything is ready for you to start your studies. You may be asked to visit the medical school to meet staff who will be supporting you on the course and there may be meetings to agree the process for providing this support.

There may be exceptional circumstances where preparation for your arrival will not be completed before the start of term. In these circumstances you may be asked to wait a year before starting the course rather than having a delayed start and not being able to fully engage with or enjoy your studies. That is why it is never too early to seek advice from medical schools.

Starting medical school

Most of the work to put in place adjustments and support will happen before you start medical school. This is why you should declare your disability as early as possible in the application process as it will help your medical school put adjustments in place before you start.

If you have minor support needs such as extra time in assessments these may be confirmed during the early part of your first term. Sometimes this may require completion of further applications but the university should guide you on this.

All students should attend induction events covering the details of the support services available to them at their medical school.

Most people who go to medical school go on to become doctors, but this is not essential. Medical schools make decisions on admissions based on whether you can meet the outcomes for graduates with reasonable adjustments. You should bear in mind that medical schools may be able to provide adjustments that, in a small number of cases, can't be made by the NHS.

Medical schools will clearly flag where they think this might be the case. They will provide you with opportunities to discuss what you might need in the workplace with local postgraduate medical educators and trainers. It will be your decision as to whether you think you want to continue with your training, but medical schools will help you to make an informed decision.

While all doctors need to complete the Foundation Programme once they graduate, there is some scope to pick placements that can accommodate the adjustments you need. For example, doctors with mobility impairments can be placed in accessible sites. You can also work part time as a Foundation Doctor.

Personal stories from doctors with disabilities can be found on the [GMC's website](#).

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