

# Should Osteopathic Medical Students Take the USMLE Step 1?

## What Every Student Should Know

### D.O. Students and USMLE Step 1

A growing number of osteopathic medical students are opting to register for the United States Medical Licensure Exam (USMLE), the allopathic equivalent to the COMLEX. Historically, compared to their allopathic counterparts, osteopathic students had a lower first-time attempt, passing rate on USMLE Step 1; recent data is quite different.<sup>1-2</sup>

USMLE Step 1	2006		2012	
	Number Tested	Percent Passing	Number Tested	Percent Passing
US / Canadian MD degree	16,818	95%	18,723	96%
DO degree	1,258	77%	2,496	92%

In a recent survey of graduating osteopathic medical students (Hasty et al., 2012), the majority (over 70%) reported that osteopathic students should take USMLE Step 1; the most often cited reason was "to keep options open". These results are similar to those of a previous study (Punswick et al., 2006).

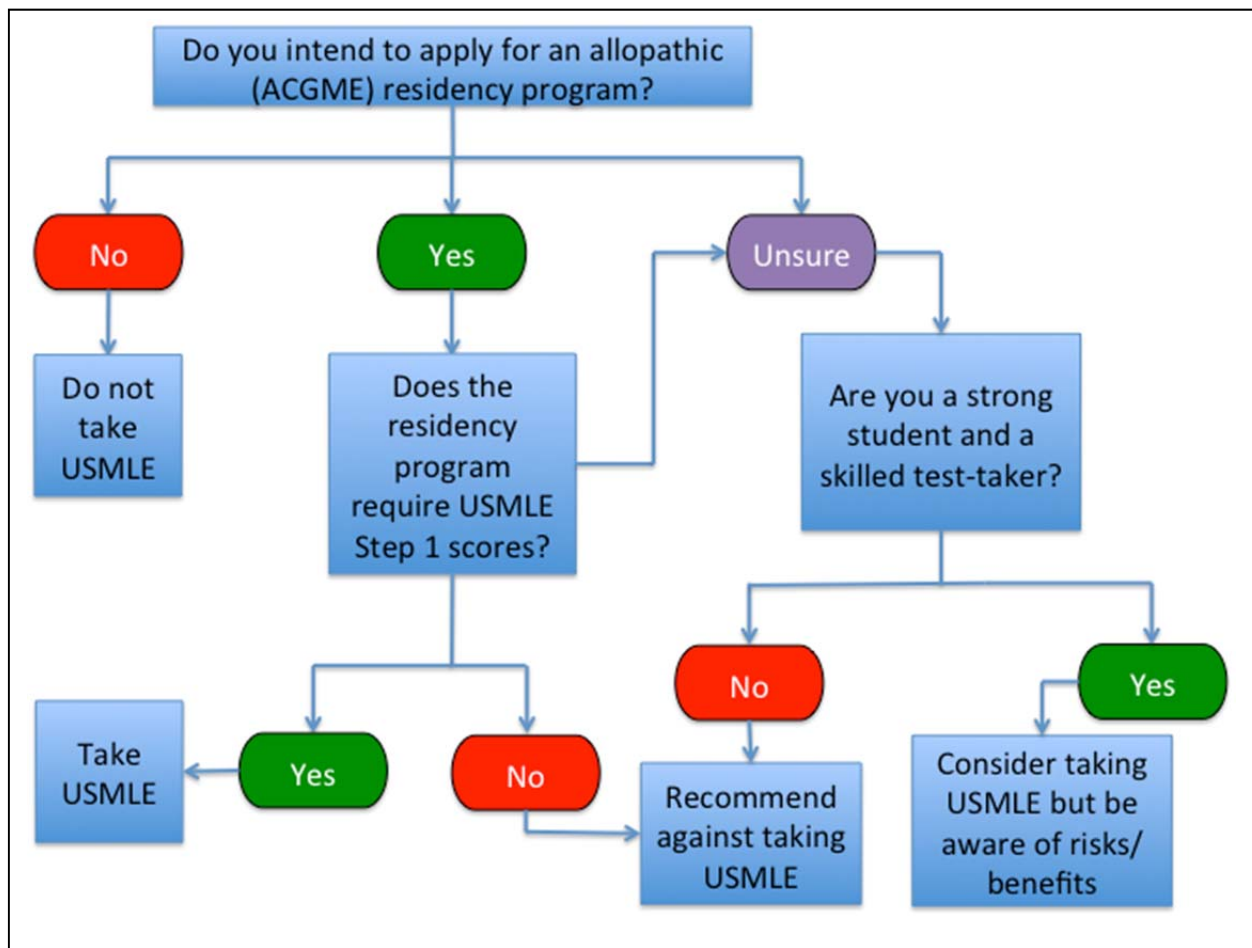
*Is this a good enough reason to take this examination?*

Consider this, if your goal is to increase your options because you are uncertain of what residency program(s) you will apply to, what happens if you fail or do not score well on the exam? Have you considered that taking the USMLE has the potential to reduce or eliminate your options, rather than increase them?

## What are some of the Risks and Benefits of taking the USMLE Step 1?

Risks (and additional costs)	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A failing score (probably) or below-average score (possibly) could decrease residency application competitiveness</li> <li>• Additional stress related to studying for another high-stakes exam</li> <li>• Studying differently for an exam that has a different emphasis than COMLEX</li> <li>• May send wrong message regarding commitment to osteopathic profession</li> <li>• Expense of a second exam</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A good* score <i>may</i> increase competitiveness for allopathic residency programs</li> <li>• A good* score <i>may</i> allow more flexibility in terms of residency options</li> <li>• Enables student to apply to ACGME residencies that require USMLE scores</li> </ul> <p>*definition of “good” see next page</p>

## A Decision-making algorithm for your consideration:



**Q: What is a “good” USMLE score?**

**A:** As with COMLEX, USMLE scores are standardized. The predetermined pass level for the USMLE is 188 (COMLEX = 400); the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile is ~225 (COMLEX = 500).<sup>5-6</sup> Although a competitive score depends on factors unique to each residency program (e.g., related to the applicant pool and the number of available slots, i.e., “supply and demand”), it is reasonable to assume that a “good” score will be one that lies above, not below, the average (i.e., 50<sup>th</sup> percentile). Therefore, if one opts to take USMLE, one should plan to score >225.

**Q: Do I have to report my score?**

**A:** No. Scores are not automatically reported to residency programs. You have to give permission to NBME (and NBOME) to release your examination score. However, on the ERAS application there is a question regarding taking USMLE. If you answer “no” but *did* in fact take the exam, you are falsifying your application. If you answer “yes” but do not opt to release your scores, then you will come across as trying to hide something, i.e., poor test scores. Unfortunately, this is a lose-lose situation. Taking USMLE and doing poorly can negatively impact your future.

**Q: How can I find out if a residency program requires a USMLE Step 1 score?**

**A:** There is no single source for this information. The best way to find the answer is by researching the residency program(s) you are interested in. FREIDA is a useful web resource for finding allopathic residency programs.

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/education-careers/graduate-medical-education/freida-online.page>.

**Q: Are there any states that require taking USMLE to practice?**

**A:** No, there are no states that require D.O.s to have passed the USMLE.

**Q: How will the ACGME Common Program Requirements affect my residency options?**

**A:** This is an ongoing dialogue. For the latest information please visit the following:

<http://www.acgme.org/acgmeweb/tabid/328/GraduateMedicalEducation/ProgramDirectorsandCoordinators.aspx>

<http://www.osteopathic.org/inside-aoa/Pages/ACGME-single-accreditation-system.aspx>

**Q: If I am applying for a residency program within the Statewide Campus System (SCS), do I need to take the USMLE?**

A: No. Currently, SCS programs are either AOA accredited or dually accredited (AOA and ACGME). They only require COMLEX scores. <http://scs.msu.edu/programs/>

**Q: I am a resident of Canada what do I need to know that uniquely applies to me?**

A: Please see the answer to the following question.

**Q: Whom should I contact if I have additional questions?**

A: Please contact Student Services, Office of Academic and Career Guidance.

[http://www.com.msu.edu/Students/Career\\_Guidance/Index.htm](http://www.com.msu.edu/Students/Career_Guidance/Index.htm)

**References cited (all references and weblinks above accessed 11.20.2013):**

1. [http://www.usmle.org/performance-data/default.aspx#2006\\_step-1](http://www.usmle.org/performance-data/default.aspx#2006_step-1)
2. [http://www.usmle.org/performance-data/default.aspx#2012\\_step-1](http://www.usmle.org/performance-data/default.aspx#2012_step-1)
3. Hasty RT, et al. (2012) "Graduating Osteopathic Medical Students' Perceptions and Recommendations on the Decision to Take the United States Medical Licensing Examination" *JAOA* 112(2): 83-89. <http://www.jaoa.org/content/112/2/83.full>
4. Punswick KJ, et al. (2006) "Osteopathic Medical Students and the Allopathic Licensing Examination" *JIAMSE* 16(2): 93 - 99. [http://www.iamse.org/jiamse/volume16-2/16-2\\_93-99.pdf](http://www.iamse.org/jiamse/volume16-2/16-2_93-99.pdf)
5. <http://www.usmle.org/transcripts/>
6. <http://www.nbome.org/comlex-cbt.asp?m=can>