

Multiple Choice Questions—Overview and Tips

MCQs is a common form of assessment in which you are asked to select the best possible answer out of a number of choices. The MCQs format is used in the Medical Council of Canada Evaluation Examination (MCCEE) and the Medical Council of Canada Qualifying Part I (MCCQE I). A MCQ exam is considered a valid and reliable assessment of knowledge. It is easy to administer and mark, and covers many different topics. If you are not familiar with this type of questions, the information provided in this fact sheet will benefit you in your preparation for MCQs.

MCQs are designed to challenge you but not to confuse you. A common error made by people taking the exam is to study only to the point that they can recognize the correct answer.

Strategies

Before the test

- Thorough knowledge of the subjects and understanding of the concepts and ideas underlying them.
- Test yourself periodically to help you identify your weaknesses and strengths.
- Once you are done reviewing a section of the notes, put them away and try to summarize the information on a paper or orally.
- Try to explain the concepts to friends and study partners.
- Ensure that you are well rested before the test. Do not overwork yourself the night before and eat well. Sleep deprivation has been associated with decreased mental alertness.

Strategies

During the test

- Watch your time
- Answer questions systematically
- Identify the underlying meaning of difficult questions
- Guess strategically
- Do not change your answer, unless you have a good reason to do so.

Answering questions systematically ensures that you do not miss important information. First, cover up all alternative answers before reading the first part of the question. Read the question carefully and identify key words. Translate the question into your own words and watch for important words, such as **not** or **always**.

After reading the question carefully, predict an answer without looking at the alternatives. Then uncover the alternatives and read all of them carefully, even if your first choice seems correct. Then look for the best answer.

Language used in MCQs can be confusing. Identifying the underlying meaning of difficult questions will enable you to increase your chances of choosing the right answer.

When you are trying to answer a difficult question, there are some techniques that you can use to improve your chances of selecting the right answer.

- Absolute terms, such as **never**, **always** or **none** often (but not always) indicate that the statement is false.
 - Irrelevant information may distract you from choosing the right answer. Crossing out the irrelevant information and underlining key points will help you maintain focus.
 - Treat each alternative as a true-false statement, and search for the one true statement among the alternatives.
 - If debating between two similar answers, try identifying which is the worse answer, rather than which is the better one.
 - If some of these techniques seem helpful, make sure you familiarize yourself with them in a practice exam well before the actual exam.
- If you tried the previous techniques but are still unable to identify the right answer, then you can guess. There are several techniques that are used to guess strategically.
- Cross off any alternatives that you know

are wrong. If you cross off the alternatives that you believe are wrong, then you increase your chances of success from 20% to 40, 60 or 80%.

- Skip the question and come back to it later (within the same section) - a question further along may trigger your memory. Reread the question carefully when you come back to it; you might have missed something the first time.
- Guess if you still don't know the answer since there is no penalty for wrong answers.

Other Strategies

There are flaws in MCQs that have been missed by the people who wrote these questions. You can benefit from these flaws.

- Correct answers tend to fall in B or C positions
- Grammatical cues. If the answer does not follow grammatically from the first part of the question, it might be a cue for the wrong answer.
- Correct answer tend to be longer than other choices available.
- The terms **may**, **could**, and **can** are cues for the correct answer since everything is possible.
- Repeating a word or phrase might be a cue for the right answer

How Should I study for MCQs?

- Start by doing a practice MCQ exam and assess your performance in different topics areas.
- Focus most of your study on your weak areas.
- Use slimmer books designed for medical students rather than the massive ones that are designed as reference texts.
- Assess your progress regularly by doing practice MCQs and adjusting your studying according to the results.

Techniques mentioned in this fact sheet do not substitute for proper preparation but they may help turn a failing score into a pass.