



## **Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Application Guide**

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### **What is a career like within Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation?**

- Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (also known as PM&R or Physiatry) is an exciting and diverse field. There are many different practice settings – inpatient rehabilitation, outpatient clinic, inpatient consultations, procedures, diagnostic testing. PM&R physicians see many different patient populations. Some physiatrists have more general practices and take care of patients with a range of conditions. Other physiatrists choose to subspecialize into fields such as musculoskeletal medicine, sports medicine, pain medicine, pediatric rehabilitation, neurorehabilitation (such as brain injury, spinal cord injury, stroke), cardiac rehabilitation, cancer rehabilitation, performing arts medicine, amputee medicine, neuromuscular and electrodiagnostic medicine, hospice and palliative medicine, and wound care. Career options exist in research, private practice settings, and academia.

### **What can you do during medical school to prepare for a career in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation?**

#### Mentorship:

How do I find a mentor in the field of PM&R?

- Contact PM&R residents or faculty at your home institution or in your area
- Association of Academic Physiatrists Resident/Fellow Council [Medical Student Mentorship - Association of Academic Physiatrists \(physiatry.org\)](#)
- Association of Academic Physiatrists Medical Student Council Big Buddy Program [Medical Student Council - Association of Academic Physiatrists \(physiatry.org\)](#)
- American Osteopathic College of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation Mentorship Program [Student Mentorship Program – AOCPMR](#)

What type of mentors/advisors can provide helpful guidance?

- For career advice, shadowing, learning about the field, scholarly activity opportunities
  - PM&R residents at your home or local/regional institution
  - PM&R faculty at your home or local/regional institution
  - PM&R physicians in outpatient private practice
  - PM&R physicians who work in inpatient rehabilitation facilities not affiliated with an academic program (may require proactive outreach)
  - PM&R Student Interest Group faculty mentors
  - PM&R physicians who are active on social media
- For PM&R specific residency application advice
  - Faculty advisor and/or resident advisor at an academic center with a residency program who is knowledgeable about current application processes.

- Mentors from the national programs listed above (let them know you are specifically interested in application advising)
- Your school's application advisors (even if your school does not have a PM&R residency program, your school's advisors may have a network of PM&R advisors they or other students have engaged in the past)

#### Scholarly Activity:

\*This Includes research, case reports, case series, quality improvement projects, poster presentations and more.

What types of research experiences are recommended for a student applying into PM&R?

- According to the 2021 NRMP Program Director Survey, program directors gave “Demonstrated involvement and interest in research” an average rating of 2.7/5 in importance when selecting applicants to interview. [2021-PD-Survey-Report-for-WWW.pdf \(nrmp.org\)](#)
- The focus on research is variable among PM&R residency programs, and some programs are more clinically based and put less emphasis on research experience.
- Research ideally is related to the field of PM&R (disability, sport medicine, pain, neurology, orthopedics, rheumatology). However, PM&R programs appreciate that many applicants discover the field of PM&R at various points during medical school and may have research experience in other fields.
- Being an author on presentations and publications may be seen as more valuable than research experience without a scholarly product.
- Research mentors who are affiliated with academic PM&R programs may be able to involve you in presenting at PM&R specific meetings.

#### Volunteer/Leadership:

What types of activities and experiences are recommended for a student applying into PM&R?

- There are many great ways to volunteer while learning more about the field of PM&R, such as volunteering with people with disabilities or disability rights organization, sports coverage or pre-participation physicals, community clinics, or adaptive sports.
  - Longitudinal volunteer or leadership experiences are typically recognized as more valuable than multiple brief experiences.
- Consider searching out PM&R specific leadership such as PM&R student interest groups or PM&R society leadership positions. Many states and cities have PM&R societies as well.
- Leadership and volunteer opportunities prior to medical school may be important to share in your application if they relate to why you chose PM&R as a specialty or have carried over into medical school. Avoid listing too many pre-medical school activities at the expense of activities in medical school.
- Leadership and volunteer experiences outside of PM&R are highly valued if they are of personal importance and you demonstrate a sincere commitment. These activities will help paint a picture of who you are when you write your personal statement or other aspects of your application. The field of PM&R values diversity of experience and pursuit of your personal passions

#### Externships:

What type of optional psychiatry-specific summer externships are available for students between their first and second year of medical school?

- AAP Rehabilitation Research Experiences for Medical Students (<https://www.psychiatry.org/page/RREMS>)

- AAP Medical Student Summer Clinical Externship (<https://www.physiatry.org/page/MSSCE>)
- Other schools may have a summer externship in PM&R, check with your local PM&R programs and summer experience lists at your medical school.
- AAP Summer Virtual Program  
[https://www.physiatry.org/general/custom.asp?page=Virtual\\_PMR\\_Intro](https://www.physiatry.org/general/custom.asp?page=Virtual_PMR_Intro)
- Shadowing on an inpatient rehabilitation unit or outpatient clinics

### Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Rotations:

#### Career Exploration/shadowing:

- It is recommended that you shadow or rotate within several different specialty areas to get a full perspective of the breadth and depth of PM&R to ensure that the field is a good fit for you.
- If possible, spending time in a PM&R department that has a residency program can provide additional insight into the day-to-day life of PM&R residents.

#### What type of rotation should I do?

- For the vast majority of students, completion of at least one rotation in PM&R is preferred to ensure your understanding of PM&R and demonstrate your commitment to PM&R. It is a good idea to get experiences in both inpatient and outpatient PM&R to learn the full scope of the field. Consider rotations such as general PM&R, pediatric PM&R, sports medicine, or pain management.

#### How many:

- Two rotations in PM&R are recommended if your schedule permits. Additional rotations are not required but may be considered if there are specific programs you are highly interested in or if you have a weaker application but shine clinically.

#### What if my school does not have PM&R department?

- Check to see if your school allows rotations with private PM&R physicians in your community.
- Otherwise see Away Rotations section below.

#### Elective rotations in fourth year:

- There are no specific types of rotations that can “prepare” you for residency.
- We would recommend doing rotations that are interesting to you as you never know when it will come back to be useful rather than doing a rotation you think is important but you are not interested in.
- Consider rotations that relate to conditions commonly seen in PM&R such as neurology, neurosurgery, trauma surgery, orthopedics, rheumatology, or radiology, urology, GI. You may not always be able to do rotations in these specialties during residency.

#### How can I excel during my Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation rotation?

- Be proactive in seeing patients, writing notes, and creating treatment plans.
- Develop good relationships with your patients.
- See your patients in therapy.
- Think about the patient’s functional status and rehabilitation goals in addition to their medical needs.
- Be professional and courteous with all residents, students, and staff that you encounter.

- Take advantage of extra learning opportunities (this could include taking call with your team, shadowing outside of normal clinic hours)
- Ask yourself questions about your patients and their diagnoses, look something up, and discuss with your team.
- Ask for feedback from faculty members and/or residents midway through the rotation, so that you can act on this feedback to improve.
- If you are hoping to get a letter of recommendation from your preceptor, let them know before the end of the rotation
- Be yourself, programs want to match people who would be good personality fit almost equally (if not more) than someone who is great clinically/academically.

#### Away Rotations:

Should I do an away rotation?

- In many cases, an away rotation will help you and a program get to know each other. If you do well, this is more information a program has when determining who to invite to interview. However, if you attend an away rotation and do not meet expectations, it can hurt your chances of getting an interview and/or matching to that program.

How do I set up an away rotation?

- Most visiting rotations are set up through the Visiting Student Learning Opportunities (VSLO) through the AAMC ( [Visiting Student Learning Opportunities | AAMC](#))
- If you do not find the school you want to rotate with through VSLO, look at the AAP's program directory (<https://www.psychiatry.org/page/ProgramDirectory>) and email residency or clerkship coordinators to ask about opportunities.

When to apply for visiting rotations:

- Start early! Many school's open their visiting applications in February-March. Some schools have application deadlines on a rolling basis throughout the year. Check VSLO for specific dates for each school.
- There are often very limited spots each month for visiting students so applying soon after VSLO opens and being as flexible as possible with dates requested can help your chances of obtaining an away rotation.

When to complete away rotations:

- The best time to rotate is June – October but students may find a benefit to rotations through January. If you are hoping to get a letter of recommendation from the rotation, it should be completed before ERAS opens (typically September) so it can be included in your application.

Cancellations:

- If you accept but then are unable to attend an away rotation, contact the clerkship coordinator as soon as possible to cancel the rotation. It is unprofessional to cancel at the last minute and may reflect poorly on your future application to that program. An empty spot may leave another applicant without the chance to do a rotation.

## Application guidelines:

How are board scores used?

- PM&R programs have long valued prospective residents who are well rounded, understand the specialty of PM&R, and work well within teams. Historically board scores were only one part of the bigger picture when programs review applications.
- With increasing competitiveness of the field, failure of either board exam will impact ability to match however the extent of which is not fully known. We would recommend that you get a passing score prior to applying to programs.

Is it important to take Step 2 early?

- According to the NRMP Match Data (2021) program directors gave USMLE Step 2 score an average rating of 3.8/5 and COMLEX 2 score an average rating of 3.7/5 in importance when selecting applicants to interview. However, this data should be interpreted with caution as Step 1 had not changed to Pass/Fail yet nor had the ERAS application updates gone into effect. Updated data from the NRMP program directors survey is not available at this time.

How to address weaknesses in your application?

- It is a good idea to address weaknesses in your application (low or failed Step scores, failed classes or clerkships, unexplained interruptions during medical school, lapses in professionalism) in advance. If these are not explained in your application, then the program may not offer you an interview. These issues are best addressed either in your personal statement or the Impactful Experience section of the ERAS application. Always include any ways that these experiences have led to personal growth. It is recommended to have a trusted advisor review this prior to submitting your application.

Letters of Recommendation:

How many letters of recommendation do I need, and who should they be from?

- Three letters of recommendation are required. Ideally, at least one should be from a PM&R physician or faculty member. An additional letter from a psychiatrist is not required but may be beneficial. More than two letters from PM&R physicians are not necessary. Programs will look more closely at your PM&R letters.
- Strong letters of recommendation from preceptors who can speak directly to your clinical abilities and teamwork may have potentially more beneficial than extra letters of recommendations from PM&R providers. Residents you are rotating with can often provide advice in this area.
- Letters of recommendation outside of PM&R may come from any specialty. Think about which physicians you have worked with who know you well and will be able to write you a strong letter.
- A letter of recommendation from a sub internship is valuable to highlight your performance at an increased level of responsibility.
- A letter of recommendation from a research preceptor can be used as a supplement or fourth letter of recommendation, but in most cases should not replace a letter from a clinical preceptor
- Consider asking for more letters of recommendation than you need. Circumstances may arise in which some of your letter writers cannot complete the letter on time and so having additional letters will help ensure that you have enough to submit a complete application. Different letters can be submitted to different programs.

When to ask for a letter:

- Ideally before or at the end of the rotation during your 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year. It is permissible to reach out and ask after the rotation is complete for a letter, however letters are best written when the rotation is fresh in the mind of the letter writer.

How to ask for a letter of recommendation:

- Identify potential letter writers early during a given rotation and try to work with that person as often as possible. Ask for feedback at the midpoint of the rotation and work hard to improve based on that feedback.
- When possible, consider mentioning at the beginning of the rotation that you are hoping your preceptor might be able to write you a letter. Ask what you can do to excel during your time together. Then sit down at the end of the rotation, ask for additional feedback, and ask if the physician is comfortable writing you a strong letter of recommendation.

Personal statement (PS):

What should your personal statement include?

- Make sure you write it yourself and that it reflects who you are as a unique person.
- Avoid making this a list of items from your CV.
- It is a good idea to include some of your experiences that have led you to the field of PM&R. Demonstrate a deep understanding of the field of PM&R and include a discussion of why you will be a good fit for the field of PM&R.
- Address your goals for PM&R training.
- If the experience that brought you to PM&R relates to your own health, you may make the choice to disclose personal health information. If you choose to mention a chronic health condition in you, a family member, or friend, be prepared to discuss this during interviews.
- Your personal statement may be a good place to discuss specific weaknesses as well as any successes that are not well captured by the ERAS application (i.e global health experiences, leadership experiences, previous career paths). It should not be longer than one page. Generally, avoid provocative topics and language. Talk with your application advisor(s) for more advice specific to your own situation.
- Use professional and respectful language in your personal statement. Casual language and slang may be interpreted as lack of professionalism.

Who should review your personal statement?

- Have someone (or several people) read and edit for grammar, content, and perspective on your disclosure of personal information. If possible, have your faculty mentor or advisor review for content.

ERAS:

What should I include in my ERAS application?

- This is your opportunity to show your experiences and interests outside of medical school and studying.
- The 2023-24 ERAS application underwent significant changes as delineated below:

Current MyERAS Application	MyERAS Application for the 2024 Cycle
Undefined number of experiences.	Up to 10 experiences.
Not available.	Enables applicants to self-select their top three most meaningful experiences (of up to 10 experiences).
Collected <i>limited</i> descriptive information about each experience entry (e.g., position, organization, timeframe, location).	Collects <i>more</i> descriptive information about each experience entry (e.g., position, organization, timeframe, location) as well as frequency of participation options (e.g., one time, daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually).
Not available.	Allows applicants to better define the experience type (e.g. volunteer, work, professional organization, hobby). This helps programs to easily identify and review specific experiences that align with their mission(s).
Not available.	Offers additional multiple-entry questions to capture mission-focused characteristics of each experience entry—focus area, key characteristic, and setting (e.g., rural, suburban, urban). This helps programs complete holistic review.
Undefined Experiences Description field.	Includes short descriptions focused on critical information for programs—roles, responsibilities, and context for all experiences entries.

<https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-residencies-eras/what-s-new-2024-myeras-application>

- Keep all information accurate and truthful – ANYTHING you include in your ERAS application is fair game for interview questions.
- When choosing which 10 experiences to report, consider choosing a variety of types of experiences which portray a well-rounded student. Leadership experiences, experiences that are long term commitments, activities involving individuals with disabilities, and research where you had a prominent role have typically been held in high regard in the PM&R community.
- It is recommended to minimize the number of experiences than occurred prior to medical school, unless they carried over into medical school and/or played a significant role in your choice of PM&R as a specialty.
- There is no need to include shadowing experiences.
- You can consider including meaningful one-time volunteer experiences as long as they could be combined into one labeled experience. However, be mindful that program directors may have different views on “combining experiences into one heading” and may consider it a way that students are trying to circumvent the system to pad their application.
- You do not need to use all 10 experiences.

How do I utilize program signaling to my advantage?

- Program signaling and geographic preferences were trialed in PM&R in the 2022-23 supplemental application and embedded within the main application in the 2023-24 application cycle.
- In 2023-24, applicants who sent a signal received an interview 51% of the time (median). Those who did not send a program signal received an interview 12% of the time (median).
- Each individual program likely uses signaling differently depending on the number of program signals they receive. In 2023, programs received a median of 46.9 signals (minimum 3 signals, maximum 170 signals), and 10 programs received 23% of all signals)

- Those applicants whose geographic preference aligned with the program were offered interviews 23% of the time (median), those who chose “no preference” 14% of the time, and those who chose a geographic preference that did not align with the program 8% of the time.
- It is recommended you use all available signals
- Programs do not know where applicants signaled, only whether they received a program signal to their program.
- General advice for signaling
  - a. Applicants should consider signaling programs where they wish to ensure review of their application for consideration of an interview.
  - b. Applicants should consider signaling programs where they have a connection or compelling reason to attend which may otherwise not be known to the program.
  - c. Applicants should consider choosing multiple geographic preferences as opposed to “no preference” even if they don’t have a particular geographic preference.
  - d. Per AAMC guidelines, applicants should signal their home program and any away rotations that they have a strong desire to interview with.

## Application Process:

How to determine to which residency programs you should apply?

- Many factors influence choice of program – geography, program size, program reputation, program strengths. This decision should be based on your personal preferences, your academic record, and based on discussions with your advisor.
- You should apply to programs of varying competitiveness and be careful to avoid applying only to top tier programs because you have a strong USMLE/COMLEX 2 score.
- If you have a strong interest in pediatric rehabilitation, consider applying to the combined pediatric/PM&R residency programs.

Which programs should I apply to/How to pick the right program for you?

- Some available resources with information on different residency programs:
  - Doximity Residency Navigator (<https://residency.doximity.com/>)
  - AAP program list (<https://www.physiatry.org/page/ProgramDirectory>)
  - Specific Program Websites and social media postings
  - RFC podcasts (<https://soundcloud.com/qc7sfcqxl2d/applying-to-residency-secrets-from-program-directors>; <https://soundcloud.com/qc7sfcqxl2d/applying-to-pmr-residency-secrets-from-residents>)
  - StudentDoctor.net
  - AAP Residency Program Physiatry Online Directory (POD). <https://pod.physiatry.org/>
  - There are a myriad of student run websites/repositories that provide opinions regarding specific programs. Use of these unmonitored sources should be minimized as there is often no way to confirm information being posted.

How many programs should you apply to?

- The specific number of programs to apply to depends on your academic record and the competitiveness of your target programs. This should be individualized for each applicant.
- In general, there has been a trend of overapplication over the last several years.



- According to the 2023 Applicant survey PM&R applicants applied to a median of 53.5 programs (25-75% range 40.5-70.7 programs)
- Determining which programs and how many programs to include should be a discussion with your PM&R advisor.
- According to 2023 NRMP data, matched MD applicants applied to a median of 35 programs, received 14 interview offers, attended 13 interviews, and ranked 13 programs. This compares to unmatched MD applicants who applied to a median of 50 programs, received 15 interview offers, attended 14 interviews, and ranked 14 programs.
- According to 2023 NRMP data, matched DO applicants applied to a median of 53 programs, received 15 interviews, attended 13 interviews, and ranked 13 programs. This compares to unmatched DO applicants who applied to a median of 72 programs, received 15 interview offers, attended 15 interviews, and ranked 15 programs.
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How competitive of a field is PM&R?

- PM&R continues to grow in popularity.
- In the 2023 Match there were 531 spots (both categorical and advanced). 529 of those spots filled giving a % fill rate of 99.6% (NRMP 2023). Fill rate since 2016 has consistently been >95%

What is the difference between a categorical program and an advanced program?

- Categorical programs are four years and include a one-year medicine internship and three years of PM&R training. These programs allow you to spend four years at one program.
- An advanced residency program consists of three years of PM&R training; a separate internship must be done prior to starting residency.
- You will get excellent training at either a categorical program or an advanced program; the requirements for the three years of PM&R are the same for both types of programs. The categorical program allows you to continue at the same institution for four years, while the advanced program gives you more flexibility with where you can do your internship.

Should you apply for categorical programs, advanced programs, or both?

- If you are really interested in a program that has both advanced and categorical options, you should apply to both to increase your chances of matching there.

What type of internship should I do?

- You need to consider your priorities, geography, transitional vs medicine vs family medicine vs surgical vs pediatric, community vs academic.
- Any internship is acceptable but you want to make sure that you have a solid understanding of clinical medicine before starting your residency.
- You should avoid doing an “easy” internship as PM&R residency does include the management of many medically complex patients and conditions.

## Interviews:

What should be your goal number of interviews?

- The median matched PM&R candidate interviewed at 13-14 programs in 2023 (NRMP Applicant Survey data)

What if you do not hear back from a program regarding an interview spot?

- If you have not received an offer within one month after you have submitted your application, consider reaching out to the program coordinator or program director for the programs in which you are most interested. This should be a personal request (not a generic email – include why you specifically are interested in that program).

How do you schedule interviews?

- The majority of interviews take place in late October, November, December, and early January. You may wish to take time off during those months, or sign up for rotations that make it easy to schedule interview days.
- Recent recommendations are that programs do not offer more interviews than they have interview slots and allow up to 48 hours to accept an invitation. Thus, you should not have to be tied to your computer/phone. However each program releases interviews differently and you may have more options for interview dates if you respond earlier. We recommend informing the residents/faculty you are rotating with so as not to appear unprofessional.
- If you need to cancel an interview, please cancel this as soon as possible. Cancelling an interview last minute (if not for an emergency situation) is unprofessional.

What can I expect during the residency interview day?

- Since the pandemic, most PM&R interviews have remained virtual. This is re-evaluated yearly and 2024-25 recommendations have not been determined.
- Pre-interview social event: Many programs have a social event with residents either the night before or the day of the interview. You should make an effort to attend these socials if at all possible. Dress is business casual. These events allow you to get to know the residents in a casual setting and obtain the residents' perspective on the program. Make sure to stay positive – making negative comments, drinking too much, or acting in an unprofessional way are big red flags to a program. This behavior may carry more weight than any other aspect of your application. Programs are varied as to the format of these events in the virtual format, however many will specify whether drinks, snacks, dinner, etc are encouraged. If it is unclear, don't hesitate to reach out to the program coordinator before the event.
- Program welcome: Most residency interview days include an introduction from program leadership and a program overview. Often programs will provide a virtual tour of the facilities, however this is done in a variety of ways (i.e. link to video to watch on own, play video during interview day, etc). Pay attention even if you know the information from previous experience or review of the website. Show respect to everyone you encounter during your interview day.
- Formal interviews: This is a chance for the faculty or residents to get to know you. You should be professional and personable. Be prepared with some questions; make sure you have reviewed specific information about the program before your interview day. Sometimes, all of your questions about the program may have been answered previously during the program welcome; make sure to have some general back up questions ready to go (examples: What do you believe are the biggest strengths of this program? What type of resident is likely to be

successful here? What do you see changing within this program in the near future?) It's acceptable to ask the same question to different interviewers to hear different perspectives on a program however please avoid asking questions just to ask questions. Avoid overly negative questions, you can ask challenging questions but do so in a positive and productive way.

- Potential interview questions: Why are you interested in the field of PM&R? Tell me about yourself. Why are you interested in this program specifically? What is your biggest strength that you can bring to the program? What was your biggest challenge of medical school and how did you tackle it? Tell me about your research/hobby/experience that is listed on your ERAS application (make sure your application is completely truthful).
- Post Interview letters: it is a good idea that you send letters, either on paper or via email. These are more impactful if they are personal or reflect something specific about the program or interview day. If a program is definitely your top choice, you may include this in your letter, but please do not be disingenuous about this (i.e. do not send multiple letters to different programs stating they are your top choice). Some programs specifically indicate that letters should not be sent and if so you should respect this request. If you are unsure about how to handle post-interview letters, touch base with your advisor.
- Second looks: With the change to virtual interviews, in-person second looks are allowed, however this is up to the individual residency program's discretion. According to the PM&R code of conduct should in-person second looks be allowed by individual programs/institutions, it is recommended that they occur after the program has finalized the rank order list and program leadership should have minimal involvement to minimize bias.
- Virtual Interview etiquette/recommendations:
  - You should identify a location that will be free from distractions and has good internet connection. While programs are certainly understanding of technical issues and minor distractions, these can often impact your overall experience with a program.
  - Test out your setup before your first interview day. Consider additional lighting/separate camera if you appear darker on the screen. Headphones/ear buds are ok, but just ensure that whatever audio you choose to use allows you to be clearly understood.
  - Confirm that you know the start times for activities (and adjust to your time zone). It is advised to log on at least 10-15 minutes before the start time just in case there are technical difficulties.
  - You should remain on camera during all official aspects of the interview day.
  - Put your cell phone or other technology away during your interview day.
  - It is ok to take notes during the program overview or interviews, but do not let it distract you from maintaining eye contact with the speaker/interviewer
  - Be aware of your surroundings, interviewers may ask about specific items in your camera field.

## Ranking Programs:

What are the important factors to consider when ranking programs?

- Rank each program at which you interviewed – unless you would rather go unmatched than attend that program.
- Many factors influence choice of program – geography, program size, program reputation, program strengths, or personal factors such as family needs. The final rank decision should be based on all of these things, but also on which program feels like it will be the best fit for you based on your personality and your experience there during the interview day.
- Your list should be based on your personal preferences – there is no benefit in trying to guess which programs will rank you and then ranking those programs higher.

What do residency programs value the most in candidates for residency spots when considering ranking?

- Program directors (based on the 2023) Program director survey cited applicant interpersonal skills, ethics and professionalism and applicant personal attributes as important factors in considering applicants.