

# Dermatology Boards Demystified: Conquer the BASIC, CORE, and APPLIED Exams

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## PRACTICE POINTS

- To become a board-certified dermatologist, one must complete the American Board of Dermatology Certification Pathway—a staged evaluation beginning with a BASIC Exam for first-year residents, followed by 4 CORE Exam modules and a final APPLIED Exam following residency completion.
- When it comes to studying, there are more resources available than you will have time to explore fully. With so many options available, it is crucial to prioritize the ones that best match your learning style.
- A comprehensive study strategy begins during your first year of residency and appropriately intensifies in the months leading up to the exams. Make sure to cultivate test day strategies to help you stay calm, focused, and in the zone.

Dermatology trainees are no strangers to standardized examinations that assess basic science and medical knowledge, from the Medical College Admission Test and the National Board of Medical Examiners Subject Examinations to the United States Medical Licensing Examination series. To become a board-certified dermatologist, one must complete the American Board of Dermatology (ABD) Certification Pathway—a staged evaluation beginning with a BASIC exam for first-year residents followed by 4 CORE exam modules and a final APPLIED exam following residency completion that assesses one's ability to apply therapeutic knowledge and clinical reasoning in scenarios relevant to the practice of general dermatology. For exam preparation, there are more resources available than you will have time to explore fully. This article features high-yield tips and study resources alongside test-day strategies to help you perform at your best.

Dermatology trainees are no strangers to standardized examinations that assess basic science and medical knowledge, from the Medical College Admission Test and the National Board of Medical Examiners Subject Examinations to the United States Medical Licensing Examination series (I know, cue the collective flashbacks!). As a dermatology resident, you will complete a series of 6 examinations, culminating with the final APPLIED Exam, which assesses a trainee's ability to apply therapeutic knowledge and clinical reasoning in scenarios relevant to the practice of general dermatology.<sup>1</sup> This article features high-yield tips and study resources alongside test-day strategies to help you perform at your best.

## THE PATH TO BOARD CERTIFICATION FOR DERMATOLOGY TRAINEES

After years of dedicated study in medical school, navigating the demanding match process, and completing your intern year, you have finally made it to dermatology! With the USMLE Step 3 out of the way, you are now officially able to trade in electrocardiograms for Kodachromes and dermoscopy. As a dermatology trainee, you will complete the American Board of Dermatology (ABD) Certification Pathway—a staged evaluation beginning with a BASIC Exam for first-year residents, which covers dermatology fundamentals and is proctored at your home institution.<sup>1</sup> This exam is solely for informational purposes, and ultimately no minimum score is required for certification purposes. Subsequently, second- and third-year residents sit for 4 CORE Exam modules assessing advanced knowledge of the major clinical areas of the specialty: medical

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The author has no relevant financial disclosures to report.

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Cutis. 2026 January;117(1):E20-E24. doi:10.12788/cutis.1328

dermatology, surgical dermatology, pediatric dermatology, and dermatopathology. These exams consist of 75 to 100 multiple-choice questions per each 2-hour module and are administered either online in a private setting, via a secure online proctoring system, or at an approved testing center. The APPLIED Exam is the final component of the pathway and prioritizes clinical acumen and judgment. This 8-hour, 200-question exam is offered exclusively in person at approved testing centers to residents who have passed all 4 compulsory CORE modules and completed residency training. There is a 20-minute break between sections 1 and 2, a 60-minute break between sections 2 and 3, and a 20-minute break between sections 3 and 4.<sup>1</sup> Following successful completion of the ABD Certification Pathway, dermatologists maintain board certification through quarterly CertLink questions, which you must complete at least 3 quarters of each year, and regular completion of focused practice improvement modules every 5 years. Additionally, one must maintain a full and unrestricted medical license in the United States or Canada and pay an annual fee of \$150.

## HIGH-YIELD STUDY RESOURCES AND EXAM PREPARATION STRATEGIES

Growing up, I was taught that proper preparation prevents poor performance. This principle holds particularly true when approaching the ABD Certification Pathway. Before diving into high-yield study resources and comprehensive exam preparation strategies, here are some big-picture essentials you need to know:

- Your residency program covers the fee for the BASIC Exam, but the CORE and APPLIED Exams are out-of-pocket expenses. As of 2026, you should plan to budget \$2450 (\$200 for 4 CORE module attempts and \$2250 for the APPLIED Exam) for all 5 exams.<sup>2</sup>
- Testing center space is limited for each test date. While the ABD offers CORE Exams 3 times annually in 2-week windows (Winter [February], Summer [July], and Fall [October/November]), the APPLIED Exam is only given once per year. For the best chance of getting your preferred date, be sure to register as early as possible (especially if you live and train in a city with limited testing sites).
- After you have successfully passed your first CORE Exam module, you may take up to 3 in one sitting. When taking multiple modules consecutively on the same day, a 15-minute break is configured between each module.

## STUDY RESOURCES

When it comes to studying, there are more resources available than you will have time to explore; therefore, it is crucial to prioritize the ones that best match your learning style. Whether you retain information through visuals, audio, reading comprehension, practice questions, or spaced repetition, there are complimentary and paid high-yield tools designed to support how you learn and

make the most of your valuable time outside of clinical responsibilities (Table). Furthermore, there are numerous discipline-specific textbooks and resources encompassing dermatopathology, dermoscopy, trichology, pediatric dermatology, surgical dermatology, cosmetic dermatology, and skin of color.<sup>11-13</sup> As a trainee, you also have access to the American Academy of Dermatology's Learning Center (<https://learning.aad.org/Catalogue/AAD-Learning-Center>) featuring the Question of the Week series, Board Prep Plus question bank, *Dialogues in Dermatology* podcast, and continuing medical education articles. Additionally, board review sessions occur at many local, regional, and national dermatology conferences annually.

## EXAM PREPARATION STRATEGY

A comprehensive preparation strategy should begin during your first year of residency and appropriately intensify in the months leading up to the BASIC, CORE, and APPLIED Exams. Ultimately, active learning is ongoing, and your daily clinical work combined with program-sanctioned didactics, journal reading, and conference attendance comprise your framework. I often found it helpful to spend 30 to 60 minutes after clinic each evening reviewing high-yield or interesting cases from the day, as our patients are our greatest teachers. To reinforce key concepts, I used a combination of premade Anki decks<sup>14</sup> and custom flashcards for topics that required rote memorization and spaced repetition. Podcasts such as *Cutaneous Miscellaneous*, *The Grenz Zone*, and *Dermasphere* became valuable learning tools that I incorporated into my commutes and long runs. I also enjoyed listening to the *Derm In-Review* audio study guide.<sup>19</sup> Early in residency, I also created a digital notebook on OneNote (<https://onenote.cloud.microsoft/en-us/>)—organized by postgraduate year and subject—to consolidate notes and procedural pearls. As a fellow, I still use this note-taking system to organize notes from laser and energy-based device trainings and catalogue high-yield conference takeaways. Finally, task management applications can further help you achieve your study goals by organizing assignments, setting deadlines, and breaking larger objectives into manageable steps, making it easier to stay focused and on track.

## TEST DAY STRATEGIES

After sitting for many standardized examinations on the journey to dermatology residency, I am certain that you have cultivated your own reliable test day rituals and strategies; however, if you are looking for additional ones to add to your toolbox, here are a few that helped me stay calm, focused, and in the zone throughout my time in residency.

### The Day Before the Test

- Secure your test-day snacks and preferred form of hydration. I am a fan of cheese sticks for protein and fruit for vitamins and antioxidants. Additionally, I

always bring something salty and something sweet (usually chocolate or sour gummy snacks) just in case I happen to get a specific craving on test day.

- Make sure you have valid forms of identification in accordance with the test center policy.<sup>16</sup>
- Confirm your exam location and time. Testing center details can be found on the Pearson Vue portal,<sup>16</sup> which is easily accessed via the “ABD Tools” tab on the official ABD website (<https://www.abderm.org/>). Additionally, the exam location, time, and directions to the test center are located in your Pearson Vue confirmation email.
- Trust that you are prepared. Try your best to avoid last-minute cramming and prioritize a good night’s sleep.

### The Day of the Test

- Center yourself before the exam. I prefer to start my morning with a run to clear my mind; however, you can also consider other mindfulness exercises such as deep breathing or positive grounding affirmations.
- Arrive early and dress in layers. You never know if the testing location will run warm or cold.
- Pace yourself, trust your gut instincts, and do not be afraid to mark and move on if you get stuck on a particular question. Ultimately, make sure you answer every question, as you will not have points deducted for guessing.
- Make sure to plan something you are excited about for after the exam! That may mean celebrating with co-residents, spending time with loved ones, or just relaxing on the couch and finally catching up on that show you have been meaning to watch for weeks but have not had time for because you have been focused on studying (yes, we all have that one show).

### FINAL THOUGHTS

While this article is not comprehensive of all ABD Certification Pathway preparation materials and resources, I hope that you will find it helpful along your residency journey. Starting dermatology residency can feel like drinking from a firehose: there is an overwhelming volume of new information, unfamiliar terminology, and a demanding workflow that varies considerably from that

of intern year.<sup>17</sup> As a resident, it is vital to prioritize your mental health and well-being, as the journey is a marathon rather than a sprint.<sup>18</sup>

Never forget that you have already come this far; trust in your journey and remember what is meant for you will not miss you. Juggling 6 exams during residency alongside clinical and personal responsibilities is no small feat. With a strong study plan and smart test-day strategies, I have no doubt you will become a board-certified dermatologist!

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**TABLE. BASIC, CORE, and APPLIED Exam Resources for Dermatology Trainees**

Resource	Description	Website
Question banks		
Board Prep Plus	The AAD's online study tool for residents with 1900+ practice questions for the CORE and APPLIED Exams; this tool also can be accessed on the AADLearn mobile app for iOS and Android	<a href="https://www.aad.org/member/education/residents/board-prep">https://www.aad.org/member/education/residents/board-prep</a>
Board Vitals	1000+ practice questions that follow the exam content outline for the BASIC, CORE, and APPLIED Exams; this tool can also be accessed on the BoardVitals Medical Exam Prep mobile app for iOS and Android	<a href="https://www.boardvitals.com/dermatology-board-review">https://www.boardvitals.com/dermatology-board-review</a>
DermQBank	Detailed board certification exam preparatory website featuring images, Kodachromes, tables, and graphs	<a href="https://www.dermqbank.com/">https://www.dermqbank.com/</a>
Books		
<i>Andrews' Diseases of the Skin: Clinical Dermatology</i> <sup>3</sup>	Foundational dermatology textbook	
<i>Dermatology</i> <sup>4</sup>	Foundational dermatology textbook	
<i>Dermatology: Comprehensive Board Review and Practice Examinations</i> <sup>5</sup>	Review tool featuring Kodachromes, clinicopathologic correlation, practice examinations, and memory aids	
<i>Dermatology Essentials</i> <sup>6</sup>	On-the-go reference book for distilled content review	
<i>Fitzpatrick's Color Atlas and Synopsis of Clinical Dermatology</i> <sup>7</sup>	Concise reference guide that combines high-quality images with pathophysiology, diagnosis, and management	
<i>Fitzpatrick's Dermatology</i> <sup>8</sup>	Foundational dermatology textbook	
<i>Review of Dermatology</i> <sup>9</sup>	Exam study tool that covers all subspecialties and uses a bullet-point format with mnemonic devices	
<i>Self-Assessment in Dermatology</i> <sup>10</sup>	8 practice tests featuring 600+ ABD-style questions	
Podcasts		
<i>Cutaneous Miscellaneous</i>	Features board-review tips, clinical pearls, and valuable advice for dermatology trainees and early-career dermatologists	<a href="https://dermsquared.com/podcasts/cutaneous-miscellaneous-podcasts">https://dermsquared.com/podcasts/cutaneous-miscellaneous-podcasts</a>
<i>Dermasphere</i>	Highlights the latest articles and research in the field	<a href="https://dermaspherepodcast.com/">https://dermaspherepodcast.com/</a>

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TABLE. (continued)

Resource	Description	Website
Podcasts (continued)		
<i>Dialogues in Dermatology</i>	Official podcast of the AAD with weekly episodes covering clinical management and the latest advances in the practice of dermatology	<a href="https://www.aad.org/member/education/professional-education/dialogues">https://www.aad.org/member/education/professional-education/dialogues</a>
<i>PeDRA Pearls</i>	Highlights pearls from the realm of pediatric dermatology	<a href="https://pedra-podcasts.captivate.fm/">https://pedra-podcasts.captivate.fm/</a>
<i>The Grenz Zone</i>	Breaks down common skin findings to help you solidify a strong foundation of dermatological knowledge	<a href="https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-grenz-zone/id1464405265">https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-grenz-zone/id1464405265</a> (also available on Spotify and YouTube)
Virtual resources		
Anki	Open-source flashcard platform structured to augment long-term memory through spaced repetition; this tool also can be accessed via the AnkiMobile Flashcards mobile app (for iOS) or the AnkiDroid Flashcards mobile app (for Android)	<a href="https://apps.ankiweb.net/">https://apps.ankiweb.net/</a>
Boards University	Live and recorded lessons for dermatology residents and fellows with an emphasis on accessibility; of note, live lessons, better known as 21@21:00, are accessed through Dr. Kavita Mariwalla's Instagram page (@mariwalladermatology) at 9:00 PM EST in the days and months leading up to Winter, Summer, and Fall examination windows, as well as the APPLIED exam	<a href="https://boardsuniversity.com/">https://boardsuniversity.com/</a>
DermNet	Worldwide clinical resource focusing on dermatology and skin conditions	<a href="https://dermnetnz.org/">https://dermnetnz.org/</a>
Dermnemonics	Video-based learning tool centered on memory loci	<a href="https://dermnemonics.academyofmine.net/">https://dermnemonics.academyofmine.net/</a>
Derm In-Review	Study system offering board review questions, timed practice exams, clinical images, and a study guide	<a href="https://dermatologyinreview.com/odac/">https://dermatologyinreview.com/odac/</a>
VisualDx	Platform structured to improve medical decisions through augmented thinking and timely visualization; this tool can also be accessed via the VisualDX mobile app for iOS and Android	<a href="https://www.visualdx.com/">https://www.visualdx.com/</a>

Abbreviations: AAD, American Academy of Dermatology; ABD, American Board of Dermatology; PeDRA, Pediatric Dermatology Research Alliance.