

# **SPECIAL PURPOSE EXAMINATION**

**(SPEX)**

**SPEX<sup>®</sup>**

**INFORMATION BULLETIN**

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and the National Board of Medical Examiners<sup>®</sup>**

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# SPECIAL PURPOSE EXAMINATION (SPEX)

## INTRODUCTION

The SPEX was established in 1988 by the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB) and the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) to assist state medical boards in making licensure decisions for candidates whose medical knowledge has not been tested for some time. The SPEX is governed through a jointly appointed SPEX Oversight Committee consisting of representatives from the FSMB and the NBME.

In the United States and its territories, licensure to practice medicine is a privilege granted only by the individual medical licensing authorities (state medical boards). Each state medical board establishes its own rules and regulations and may require, as part of its licensure process, successful demonstration of current competence to practice medicine.

The SPEX is used by state medical boards to re-examine a licensed or previously licensed physician's ongoing level of basic medical knowledge. Situations in which a medical licensing board may require a physician to take SPEX include endorsement of licensure, reinstatement or reactivation of a license after a period of inactivity. In instances where the state medical board has or is aware of concerns and/or questions about a physician's fitness to practice, the results of the SPEX exam should be evaluated in conjunction with other available evidence to determine a physician's competence and fitness to practice.

## PURPOSE

The SPEX is designed to assess the ability to apply, at a minimally acceptable level, the general medical knowledge considered essential for the continued, unsupervised practice by physicians who *hold or have held* a valid, unrestricted license in a United States or Canadian jurisdiction.

## DEVELOPMENT

SPEX examination materials are developed by committees of medical experts appointed by, and working in collaboration with, the FSMB and the NBME. Members of such committees are selected for their expertise in their respective fields and are drawn from the academic, practice, and licensing communities. "All of the test materials used in the SPEX are jointly owned and copyrighted by the parent organizations, the FSMB and the NBME." Any reproduction or distribution of these test materials without express written authorization of the FSMB and NBME is prohibited.

Development and regulation of policies and procedures necessary for implementation of the SPEX are the responsibility of the SPEX Oversight Committee. Members of the Committee include highly qualified physicians from the academic and licensing communities who have experience in clinical settings.

# APPLICATION INFORMATION

## METHODS OF APPLICATION

There are two categories under which an applicant may qualify to take SPEX: board-sponsored or self-nominated.

- Board-sponsored candidates take the examination at the request and approval of a medical licensing board to demonstrate current medical knowledge. If you take the SPEX through the board-sponsored process, your examination score will be reported to you and to the board who sponsored you to take SPEX.
- Self-nominated candidates take the SPEX independent of any request or approval from a medical licensing board. If you take the SPEX through the self-nominated process, your examination score will be reported only to you. The FSMB will maintain the score in its database, and the score will be made available to medical licensing boards upon your request and completion of a transcript request and payment of appropriate fee.

## ELIGIBILITY

Eligibility requirements for admission to the SPEX are dependent on whether you are board or self-sponsored:

- *Board-sponsored:* To be eligible to take the examination through the board-sponsored process, you must hold or have held a valid, unrestricted license in a United States or Canadian jurisdiction and otherwise have met eligibility requirements established by the individual licensing boards pursuant to their statutory and regulatory provisions. If you wish to take the examination as a board-sponsored candidate, you should contact either the licensing authority from which you hold a license, and/or the licensing authority from which you plan to seek a license, to determine your eligibility according to the requirements of the jurisdiction. The FSMB maintains contact information for all licensing boards on its website at <https://www.fsmb.org/contact-a-state-medical-board/>.
- *Self-nominated:* To be eligible to take the examination through the self-nominated process, you must have a current, unrestricted license to practice medicine in a United States or Canadian jurisdiction.

## **APPLICATION PROCEDURES, FEES, AND REFUNDS**

General information on SPEX procedures, fees, and refunds is provided in this Bulletin. More detailed information and any changes that occur after the release of this Bulletin are available on the FSMB website ([www.fsmb.org](http://www.fsmb.org)). You may contact the FSMB at (817)868-4041 or at [spex@fsmb.org](mailto:spex@fsmb.org).

## **EXAMINEES WITH DOCUMENTED DISABILITIES**

Reasonable accommodations are provided to examinees with documented disabilities as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act as amended in 2008, together (“ADA”). If you are a disabled individual covered under the ADA and require test accommodations, visit the FSMB website ([www.fsmb.org](http://www.fsmb.org)) before you apply for information regarding test accommodations, including procedures and documentation requirements.

Processing of test accommodation requests may take up to eight weeks from the date sufficient documentation is received. If your request is approved, special arrangements and procedures will be established and communicated to you by the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) Disability Services unit.

SPEX score reports and transcripts do not include an annotation that a test accommodation was granted.

## **EXAMINEES WHO REQUIRE PERSONAL ITEMS IN THE TESTING ROOM**

You are prohibited from bringing personal possessions into the secure areas of the test center. However, in certain limited circumstances, exceptions to this policy may be made for medical reasons. If you have a condition that requires you to use medicine, medical devices, communication aids, mobility devices or other items in the secure areas of the testing center that are **NOT** on the approved list (see Appendix A), contact the NBME Personal Item Exception (PIE) Coordinator at [pie@nbme.org](mailto:pie@nbme.org) or 215-590-9700 for additional information on how to request a personal item exception.

All personal items, including those permitted as an exception under this policy, are subject to inspection at the test center. If you bring an item that is not on the approved list to your test administration without obtaining permission in advance, you may not be permitted to test, you may be required to relinquish the item, you may be investigated for irregular behavior, and/or your score may be held until you provide adequate documentation from your medical professional.

# SCHEDULING

## TEST CENTERS

The SPEX is administered at Prometric Testing Centers throughout the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Specific test center locations can be found on [Prometric's website](#).

## ELIGIBILITY PERIOD

You will be provided a 90-day eligibility period in which to take the examination. Eligibility periods are assigned immediately once your application is approved. It takes approximately two weeks to process an application.

If you do not take the test within your eligibility period, you may submit an eligibility extension request for a one-time, contiguous 3-month extension of your eligibility period. Eligibility extension requests can only be submitted after your scheduling permit is available and must be received no later than 25 days after the end of your original eligibility period. Additional information about requesting an eligibility extension is on the [FSMB website](#).

If you do not test within your eligibility period, you must reapply with a new application, including the full fee. The SPEX fee is not transferable from one application to another.

## SCHEDULING PERMIT

Your scheduling permit will be sent to you upon approval of your application. You should review and verify the following before scheduling your appointment:

- your name (your first and last name must match exactly with the name on the unexpired government issued form of identification you bring to the test center);
- the examination for which you registered (SPEX);
- your eligibility period (3-month window in which you must take the exam);
- your Scheduling Number (use this to schedule your exam); and
- your Candidate Identification Number (CIN) (use this to unlock your exam at the test center)

If you do not present either a printed or electronic copy of your permit (e.g., via smartphone) and acceptable identification on the day of your exam, you will not be admitted to test and will be required to pay a fee to Prometric to reschedule your test. Your rescheduled test date(s) must fall within your eligibility period.

## SCHEDULING A TEST DATE

When scheduling a test date, please keep the following in mind:

- You will be required to provide information found only on your Scheduling Permit; therefore, you must have your Scheduling Permit before you contact Prometric to schedule a testing appointment.
- Appointments are assigned on a "first-come, first-served" basis; therefore, you should contact Prometric to schedule as soon as possible after you have received your Scheduling Permit.
- You may take the test on any day that it is offered during your assigned eligibility period, provided that there is space at the test center you choose.
- Testing centers are closed on major local holidays.
- The busiest testing times in the Prometric testing network are May through July and November through December.

When you schedule your appointment, Prometric will provide you with:

- the confirmed test day, date, and time;
- the address and telephone number of the Prometric Test Center where you will test;
- your Prometric Confirmation Number.

## RESCHEDULING/CANCELING

If you are unable to keep your testing appointment on the scheduled date or at the scheduled location, you may change your date or center by following the instructions on your Scheduling Permit for contacting Prometric. To avoid a rescheduling fee, you must cancel or reschedule your appointment at least three business days before your scheduled test date. You will need to provide your Prometric Confirmation Number when you reschedule. Your rescheduled test date must fall within your eligibility period.

Rescheduling or cancellations must be made and confirmed online or by phone. For more information please visit [Prometric's website](#).

If you do not cancel your examination testing session per Prometric's procedures, you will be required to pay additional fees directly to Prometric in order to reschedule an examination testing session within the 90-day eligibility deadline.

Prometric rescheduling fees will also apply if you need to reschedule because you do not provide adequate identification at the time of admission to your testing session, or you arrive too late to begin the examination without disrupting the test center's schedule.

If you schedule an examination testing session with Prometric within the 90-day eligibility period but do not take the SPEX and do not cancel with Prometric, you will forfeit the entire fee.



You will not be allowed to reschedule beyond your eligibility period. To reapply for the SPEX, you will be required to submit a new application and fee. If you have followed Prometric's cancellation procedures, or have never scheduled an examination testing session with Prometric, you are eligible to request a partial refund of your SPEX fee. A request for a refund must be submitted to the FSMB in writing.

## TESTING

### TESTING CONDITIONS

The FSMB and the NBME have established criteria for the security, accessibility, and general comfort of computer-based testing centers. These criteria are intended to ensure that no examinee or group of examinees receives unfair advantage on the examination, inadvertently or otherwise. Efforts are made to ensure that the examinations are administered under standard conditions and in conformity with the principles on which the examination and its scoring are founded. If there is a reason to believe that the integrity of the examination process is jeopardized, the SPEX parent organizations may invalidate all or any part of an examination. If information indicates that continued testing would jeopardize the security of examination materials or the integrity of scores, the SPEX parent organizations reserve the right to suspend or cancel a test administration.

The identity of each examinee is verified before admission to the examination room. To be admitted to the examination, you must have your Scheduling Permit and an unexpired, government-issued identification form such as a driver's license or passport that includes both a photograph and a signature.

You will be required to sign in at the test center. A photo of you will be taken at the center. This administration-day photo becomes part of your SPEX record. All examination administrations will be video recorded.

If at any time during the examination you believe there is a problem with either the computer equipment or with how the program is functioning, please contact the test center administrator immediately.

### TESTING REGULATIONS

Test sessions for SPEX are monitored by test center staff, in person and through audio and visual recording. You must comply with all directions and instructions provided by the test center administrators throughout the examination. Failure to do so may result in a determination of irregular behavior.

Test center staff are not authorized to answer questions regarding registration, examination content, testing software, scoring, or retesting.

Test center staff who observe an examinee violating test administration rules or engaging in other forms of irregular behavior during an examination are required to report to the SPEX Program incidents in which examinees violate test administration rules or engage in other forms of irregular behavior; each report is fully investigated.

## **RULES OF CONDUCT**

When you apply to take the SPEX, you agree to the following:

1. You are the person named on the scheduling permit for the examination.
2. You will not seek, provide, or obtain any form of unauthorized assistance at any time, including during the examination or during breaks.
3. You will not have any prohibited materials, including formulas, study materials, notes, papers, or electronic devices of any kind in your possession while you are in the secure areas of the test center.
4. You will place in a locker or cubicle all personal belongings, including cell phones, watches, tablet PCs, iPods/media players, fitness and tracking monitors, any device with transmitting or receiving capabilities (e.g., Bluetooth), formulas, study materials, notes, papers, pens/pencils, and your purse and/or wallet, before you enter the testing room.
5. During computer-based testing, you will leave your testing station for breaks only when the break screen is visible on your monitor. It is a violation of the Rules of Conduct if you indicate on the center log that your break screen is visible when it is not.
6. You may use a telephone or other communication device only when outside the secure testing area and only during an authorized break. You may not use it for any purpose related to test content.
7. You will not remove test content from the test center by any means.
8. All examination materials remain the property of the SPEX parent organizations, and you will maintain the confidentiality of the materials. You will not reproduce or attempt to reproduce examination materials through recording, memorization, or any other means. Also, you will not provide information relating to examination content to anyone, including those who may be taking or preparing others to take the examination. This includes postings regarding examination content and/or answers on the Internet.
9. You will not write on anything other than the laminated note boards provided.

Important: If you violate these Rules of Conduct, you may be directed to leave the test center before you complete your examination. Also, evidence of violation of any test administration rule, including these Rules of Conduct, will result in actions being taken under SPEX policies and procedures on irregular behavior. If you are found to have engaged in irregular behavior, your score report and transcripts will include this finding, you may be barred from taking the SPEX in the future, and your score may be canceled.

## PERSONAL BELONGINGS – WHAT YOU CAN BRING INTO THE TESTING ROOM

Personal items are prohibited in the secure areas of the testing center. Possession of unauthorized items while in the secure areas of the testing centers may lead to a finding of irregular behavior and permanent annotation of your SPEX transcript.

Unauthorized items include, but are not limited to:

- cell phones, watches, pagers, tablet PCs, iPods/media players, fitness and tracking monitors, any device with transmitting or receiving capabilities (e.g., Bluetooth);
- outerwear, such as coats, jackets, head wear, gloves;
- book bags, backpacks, handbags, briefcases, wallets;
- books, notes, study materials, or scratch paper; and
- food, candy, gum, or beverages.

If you bring personal belongings to the test center, you must store them in a small designated locker or storage cubicle outside the secure testing area. All stored mechanical or electronic devices must be turned off. All personal items and their contents are subject to inspection.

Any materials that reasonably appear to be reproductions of any SPEX examination materials will be confiscated. Making notes of any kind during an examination, except on the materials provided by the test center for this purpose, is not permitted. Removal of those materials from the secure testing area is prohibited.

## ADMISSION TO THE EXAMINATION

You should arrive at the Prometric Test Center at least 30 minutes before your scheduled testing time. If you arrive after your appointment time, you may not be admitted. If you arrive more than 30 minutes after your scheduled testing time, you will not be admitted and must pay a fee to Prometric to reschedule your test. Your rescheduled date must fall within your assigned eligibility period.

When you arrive at the test center, you must present your SPEX scheduling permit and the required identification as described on your Scheduling Permit. Acceptable forms of identification include the following forms of unexpired identification:

- passport
- driver's license with photograph
- national identity card
- other form of unexpired, government-issued identification

Your identification must contain both your signature and photograph.

**If you do not bring your SPEX Scheduling Permit and acceptable identification, you will not be admitted to the test** and will be required to pay a fee to reschedule your test. Your rescheduled test date must fall within your eligibility period.

**Important Note: Your name as it appears on the SPEX Scheduling Permit must match the name on your form(s) of identification exactly.** If the name listed on your Scheduling Permit is not correct or does not match your form(s) of identification, contact the FSMB immediately at 817-868-4041 or [spex@fsmb.org](mailto:spex@fsmb.org).

Upon arrival at the test center, you must present the required identification, sign a test center log, be photographed, and store your personal belongings in your assigned locker.

Please note the following:

- During check-in, test center staff will scan you with a metal detector (handheld or walk-through) and ask you to empty and turn your pockets inside out before entering the testing room to confirm that you have no prohibited items. You will be asked to repeat this process each time you return to the testing room after a break. Additionally, your photo ID and fingerprint may be scanned electronically and you must sign the test center log each time you enter or exit the test room.
- You will be required to remove eyeglasses for visual inspection by the test center administrators. These inspections will take a few seconds and will be done at check-in and upon return from breaks.
- Jewelry, except for wedding and engagement rings, is prohibited.
- Hair accessories are subject to inspection. You should not wear ornate clips, combs, barrettes, headbands, and other hair accessories. Any examinee wearing any of these items may be prohibited from wearing them in the testing room and asked to store such items in their locker.

Before you enter the test room, test center staff will give you laminated writing surfaces and markers to use for making notes and/or calculations during the testing session. They should be used only at your assigned testing station, and only after you have entered your CIN to start your test session. If you have filled the laminated writing surfaces and need additional space for making notes, raise your hand to ask test center staff for a replacement. You must return laminated writing surfaces to test center staff at the end of the testing session. **Do NOT write on anything other than the laminated writing surface (e.g., skin, clothing, tissue, etc.). Failure to comply may result in a finding that you engaged in irregular behavior.**

Test center staff will collect your Scheduling Permit. You will be instructed to write your CIN on the laminated writing surfaces provided. Your Scheduling Permit will be retained at the Test Center Administrator's station. You may request access to the permit during the examination if it becomes necessary for you to rewrite the CIN on the laminated writing surface.

Test center staff will escort you to your assigned testing station and provide brief instructions on use of the computer equipment. You must enter your Candidate Identification Number to start the examination. You may then take a brief tutorial prior to starting the first test block.

## COMPLETING THE EXAMINATION

The SPEX examination is downloaded from Prometric to the testing center where you are scheduled to take the SPEX. To gain access to the examination, you must enter the unique CIN.

The examination itself is divided into 5 blocks of 60 minutes each (approximately 40 questions in each block). Timing for each section of SPEX is computer-controlled, and a “Time Remaining” box is displayed on the computer screen. You should try to answer every test item as there is no penalty for guessing. You should try to complete every block of the examination. Once you exit a block, you will not be allowed to return to that block. The test session ends when all blocks have been completed (or the total time for the test expires). You will sign out as you leave the test center and receive a test completion notice.

If you choose to leave the testing center before completing the exam, the administration will be considered incomplete. An incomplete or partial administration may affect reexamination procedures.

## BREAK TIME

Your entire testing session is scheduled for a fixed amount of time. The computer keeps track of your overall time and the time allocated for each block of the test. A “Time Remaining” box is displayed on the computer screen.

Forty-five minutes is allotted for break time. The 45 minutes for breaks can be divided in any manner, according to your preference. For example, you can take a short break at your seat after you complete a block, or you can take a longer break for a meal outside the test center after you complete a few blocks. If you complete a block of the test or tutorial section early, the remaining time will be available for breaks. It will not be available to complete other blocks of the test.

As you progress through the blocks of the test, you should monitor how many blocks are remaining and how much break time is remaining. **If you take too much break time and exceed the allocated or accumulated break time, your time to complete the last block(s) in the testing session will be reduced.**

When block time runs out, you will not be able to move to any new screens within the current block. The computer will close the block. After you complete or run out of time for each block during the test, you must respond when the computer asks you to indicate whether you want to take a break or continue. After your test, you may be asked to complete an additional block that contains survey questions about your testing experience.

## IRREGULAR BEHAVIOR

Irregular behavior includes any action by applicants, examinees, potential applicants, or others that could compromise the validity, integrity, or security of the SPEX examination process.

If you have information or evidence that any type of irregular behavior has occurred, you should call or submit a written report to the SPEX Secretariat at the following address:

SPEX Secretariat  
FSMB  
400 Fuller-Wiser Road  
Euless, TX 76039  
817-868-4041  
[spex@fsmb.org](mailto:spex@fsmb.org)

Specific examples of irregular behavior include, but are not limited to, the following:

- seeking, providing, and/or obtaining unauthorized access to examination materials;
- providing false information or making false statements on or in connection with application forms, scheduling permits, or other SPEX-related documents;
- taking or attempting to take an examination for which you are not eligible;
- taking an examination for someone else or engaging someone to take the examination for you;
- seeking, providing, or obtaining unauthorized assistance during the examination or attempting to do so;
- making notes of any kind while in the secure areas of the test center except on the writing materials provided at the test center for this purpose;
- failing to adhere to any SPEX policy, procedure, or rule, including instructions of the test center staff;
- verbal or physical harassment of test center staff or other examination staff, or other disruptive or unprofessional behavior during the registration, scheduling, or examination process;
- possessing any unauthorized materials, including, but not limited to, photographic equipment, or communication or recording devices, including electronic paging devices and cellular telephones, in the secure testing areas;
- altering or misrepresenting examination scores or outcomes;
- any unauthorized reproduction by any means, including, but not limited to, reconstruction through memorization, and/or dissemination of copyrighted examination materials by any means, including the Internet;
- communicating or attempting to communicate about specific test items, cases, and/or answers with another examinee, potential examinee, or formal or informal test preparation group at any time before, during, or after the examination;
- discussing examination content or answers on the Internet; and
- failing to cooperate fully in any investigation of a violation of the SPEX rules.

If information received suggests that irregular behavior has occurred, statistical analyses may be conducted and additional information may be gathered. You will be advised of the alleged irregular behavior, and you will have an opportunity to provide information that you consider relevant to the evaluation of the allegation. Your scores may be withheld, if they have not been reported previously. Applications may not be processed, and you may not be permitted to take subsequent examinations until a final decision regarding irregular behavior is made. You will be provided with a copy of the SPEX policies and procedures that describe in detail the process for reaching final decisions regarding irregular behavior. If the evidence suggests that the alleged irregular behavior affects score validity, the score will also be reviewed as described below.

If it is determined that you engaged in irregular behavior, information regarding this determination becomes part of your SPEX record. Your score report (if applicable) and SPEX transcript will contain a notation regarding the irregular behavior. Information about the irregular behavior will be provided to third parties that receive or have received your SPEX transcript. Such information may also be provided to other legitimately interested entities. If it is determined that the irregular behavior is egregious and/or threatens the integrity of the examination system, you may be barred from future SPEX examinations. The SPEX program reserves the right to bar an individual from the SPEX or to have special test administration procedures implemented when information regarding behavior of examinees on the SPEX indicates such actions may be necessary to ensure the security of the SPEX.

## **EXAMINATION ADMINISTRATION**

### **EXAMINATION DESCRIPTION**

The SPEX is a one-day, computer-administered examination consisting of 5 blocks of 60 minutes each (approximately 40 questions in each block).

The test items used in the SPEX focus on a core of clinical knowledge and underlying scientific principles deemed necessary to form a reasonable foundation for the safe and effective practice of medicine. SPEX content is intended to reflect the knowledge and cognitive abilities of practicing physicians.

### **EXAMINATION DESIGN**

The SPEX is constructed from an integrated content outline, which organizes content according to general principles and individual organ systems. Test questions are classified in one of 18 major areas, depending on whether they focus on concepts and principles that are important across organ systems or within individual organ systems.

**Table 1: SPEX Test Content Specifications**

<b>System</b>	<b>Approximate Percentage</b>
General Principles *	1.5%
Immune System Blood & Lymphoreticular System Behavioral Health Nervous System & Special Senses Skin & Subcutaneous Tissue Musculoskeletal System Cardiovascular System Respiratory System Gastrointestinal System Renal & Urinary System Pregnancy, Childbirth, & the Puerperium Female Reproductive System & Breast Male Reproductive System Endocrine System Multisystem Processes & Disorders	76.5%
Biostatistics & Epidemiology/Population Health & Interpretation of Medical Literature/Social Sciences	22%

\*The general principles category for the SPEX examination includes test items concerning normal processes not limited to specific organ systems. These test items are typically related to normal development. Categories for individual organ systems include test items concerning those normal and abnormal processes that are system-specific.

### **Physician Tasks/Competencies**

An additional organizing construct for SPEX design is physician tasks and competencies. Items are constructed to focus on assessing one of the following competencies:

- Medical knowledge/scientific concepts: Applying foundational science concepts
- Patient care: Diagnosis
- Patient care: Management
- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Professionalism, including legal and ethical issues
- Systems-based practice, including patient safety
- Practice-based learning, including biostatistics and epidemiology



**Table 2. SPEX Physician Tasks/Competencies Specifications**

<b>Competency</b>	<b>Approximate Percentage</b>
Medical Knowledge/Scientific Concepts	8%
Patient Care: Diagnosis History/Physical Exam Laboratory/Diagnostic Studies Diagnosis	35%
Prognosis/Outcome	
Patient Care: Management Health Maintenance/Disease Prevention Pharmacotherapy Clinical Interventions Mixed Management	35%
Communication and Professionalism	12%
Systems-based Practice/Patient Safety and Practice-based Learning	10%

## **PREPARATION FOR THE EXAMINATION**

The most appropriate preparation for the SPEX is a well-planned and comprehensive review of up-to-date medical textbooks, clinical review publications, and periodicals.

FSMB offers a free paper and pencil practice test on its website ([www.fsmb.org](http://www.fsmb.org)).

A web-based “self-assessment” – the Comprehensive Clinical Medicine Self-Assessment (CCMSA) – is also available. The CCMSA uses information typically covered in clinical encounters, and the content of the items resembles the content in SPEX. The CCMSA will help you become familiar with the question formats used in the examination and with how to maneuver within the examination before your actual test date. The CCMSA is available on the NBME website at <https://nbme.org/assessment-products/assess-learn/self-assessment-services>.

There are no test preparation courses affiliated with, or sanctioned by, the SPEX program.

# MULTIPLE-CHOICE ITEM TYPES USED IN SPEX

## Single-Item Questions

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A single patient-centered vignette is associated with one question followed by four or more response options. The response options are lettered (i.e., A, B, C, D, E). A portion of the questions involves interpretation of graphic or pictorial materials. You are required to select the best answer to the question. Other options may be partially correct, but there is only ONE BEST answer. This is the traditional, most frequently used multiple-choice question format on the examination.

### Example Question 1

1. A 30-year-old man comes to the emergency department because of an acute episode of renal colic. Medical history is remarkable for episodes of painful urination and passing of what he calls "gravel in my urine." Urinalysis demonstrates microscopic hematuria with some crystalluria and no casts. Supine x-ray of the abdomen shows no abnormalities. A 4-mm renal calculus is detected in the distal right ureter on ultrasonography. There is no evidence of dilation of the collecting system. The patient's pain is responsive to narcotic medication. In addition to administering intravenous fluids, which of the following is the most appropriate next step?

- A. Acidification of urine by drinking cranberry juice
- B. Cystoscopic removal of the calculus
- C. Cystoscopic ureteral lavage
- D. Shock wave lithotripsy
- E. Straining of the urine

(Answer: E)

## Multiple Item Sets

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A single patient-centered vignette may be associated with two or three consecutive questions about the information presented. Each question within these sets is associated with the patient vignette and is independent of the other question(s) in the set. The items within this type of format are designed to be answered in any order. You are required to select the ONE BEST answer to each question.

### Example Questions 2 to 3

A 52-year-old man returns to the office for reevaluation of an ulcer on his right great toe. The patient has a 15-year history of diabetes mellitus and takes glipizide and rosiglitazone. He first noticed the ulcer 2 months ago. One month ago, a 14-day course of oral amoxicillin-clavulanate therapy was prescribed. He has smoked one pack of cigarettes daily for the past 37 years. He is 178 cm (5 ft 10 in) tall and weighs 102 kg (225 lb); BMI is 32 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. Today, vital signs are temperature 38.8°C (101.8°F), pulse 96/min, respirations 12/min, and blood pressure 130/85 mm Hg. Physical examination of the right great toe discloses a 1.5-cm nontender ulcer with a depth of 0.5 cm, a moist base, yellow exudate, and surrounding erythema to the level of the malleoli. Vibration sense and sensation to monofilament examination are absent. Pulses are diminished in both feet. Capillary refill time is 2 seconds in the right great toe. Urinalysis discloses 3+ protein.

2. Which of the following historical factors or physical examination findings is most strongly associated with development of this patient's foot ulcer?

- A. Diminished pedal pulses
- B. Neurologic findings
- C. The patient's weight
- D. Proteinuria
- E. Tobacco use

(Answer: B)

3. Which of the following is the most appropriate action at this time?

- A. Begin aggressive debridement in the office
- B. Begin intravenous antibiotic therapy
- C. Refer the patient for transmetatarsal amputation
- D. Schedule the patient for a third-degree skin graft
- E. Switch the amoxicillin-clavulanate to oral ciprofloxacin

(Answer: B)

## Sequential Item Sets

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A single patient-centered vignette may be associated with two or three consecutive questions about the information presented. Each question is associated with the initial patient vignette but is testing a different point. You are required to select the ONE BEST answer to each question. Questions are designed to be answered in sequential order. You must click "Proceed to Next Item" to view the next item in the set; once you click on this button, you will not be able to add or change an answer to the displayed (previous) item.

### Example Questions 4 to 5

A 2-year-old girl is brought to the office by her mother for evaluation of fever. You have been the girl's physician since birth. While in the office, the girl stiffens and then has bilateral, symmetrical shaking of her upper and lower extremities; she becomes mildly cyanotic. The episode lasts for approximately 45 seconds, after which she becomes relaxed and appears to fall asleep. Vital signs at this time are temperature 40.0°C (104.0°F), pulse 120/min, and respirations 40/min. On physical examination she has a generally pink complexion and flushed cheeks. She is limp and somnolent and responds with a cry to noxious stimulus. Tympanic membranes are inflamed bilaterally, nose has a scant, clear discharge, and throat is mildly erythematous. Lungs are clear to auscultation except for transmitted upper airway sounds. Heart has rapid rate with a grade 1/6 systolic murmur at the left sternal border. Complete blood count, blood culture, lumbar puncture, and catheterized urine specimen are obtained and sent for stat analysis. Acetaminophen is administered by rectal suppository. Thirty minutes later the patient awakens and is smiling. She is afebrile. Additional history discloses that she was born at term, she had an uneventful neonatal course, she has normal growth and development, and vaccinations are up-to-date. She has never had an episode similar to this. Initial laboratory results are shown:

#### Blood

WBC

10,400/mm<sup>3</sup>

Neutrophils, segmented

25%

Neutrophils, bands

5%

Lymphocytes

65%

Monocytes

5%

#### Cerebrospinal fluid

0 RBC/mm<sup>3</sup>

#### Urinalysis

Normal

Other laboratory studies are pending.

4. In addition to ampicillin for otitis media and acetaminophen, this child also should receive which of the following?

- A. Oral ethosuximide
- B. Oral phenobarbital
- C. Oral phenytoin
- D. Rectal diazepam
- E. No additional medications

(Answer: E)

5. Two weeks later the patient is brought to the office for a follow-up visit. Her mother says that she is doing well and she has had no recurrence of her symptoms. Examination of the ears shows resolution of the otitis media. Which of the following is the most important diagnostic step at this time?

- A. Audiology testing
- B. Cognitive testing
- C. CT scan of the head
- D. EEG
- E. No additional testing

(Answer: E)

### **Pharmaceutical Advertisement (Drug Ad) Format**

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The drug ad item format includes a rich stimulus presented in a manner commonly encountered by a physician, e.g., as a printed advertisement in a medical journal. Examinees must interpret the presented material in order to answer questions on various topics, including:

- Decisions about care of an individual patient
- Biostatistics/epidemiology
- Pharmacology/therapeutics
- Development and approval of drugs and dietary supplements
- Medical ethics

### **Abstract Format**

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The abstract item format includes a summary of an experiment or clinical investigation presented in a manner commonly encountered by a physician, e.g., as an abstract that accompanies a research report in a medical journal. Examinees must interpret the abstract in order to answer questions on various topics, including:

- Decisions about care of an individual patient
- Biostatistics/epidemiology
- Pharmacology/therapeutics
- Use of diagnostic studies

# SCORING

## COMPUTATION

Your responses are electronically forwarded directly to the scoring center. Raw scores (number of questions answered correctly) are determined and then converted to a two-digit scaled score for reporting purposes. To receive a score, you must complete the entire exam. A complete examination is one in which all blocks have been accessed and the examinee either exits the examination or runs out of time. If you begin but do not complete the SPEX, no scores are reported, and an “incomplete” annotation will appear on applicable SPEX transcripts. Therefore, it is essential that you remain at the testing center for all blocks of the SPEX. Scores are truncated to a whole number, i.e., all decimal places are dropped. If you register for but do not take the SPEX, no record of the test will appear on a transcript.

## MINIMUM PASS RECOMMENDATION

The SPEX program recommends 75 as the minimum passing score for the SPEX. Medical licensing authorities may accept the recommended pass/fail result, or they may establish their own passing score. Recommended performance standards for the SPEX are based on a specified level of proficiency. As a result, no predetermined percentage of examinees will pass or fail the examination. The recommended minimum passing level is reviewed periodically and may be adjusted at any time. It should be noted that the reported score of 75 is NOT “75%” but a value on a scale that meets the requirements of licensing board statutes and regulations.

## PERFORMANCE PROFILES

As part of your score report, you receive a graphical presentation that summarizes areas of relative strength and weakness. These profiles are developed as self-assessment tools for the use of examinees. For a more detailed description of the content areas represented by the profiles, refer to the Examination Design section of this Bulletin.

## VALIDITY OF SCORES

The SPEX program assures the validity of scores reported for SPEX examinations by every means available. Your scores may be classified as *indeterminate* if the scores are at or above the passing level and the SPEX program cannot certify that they represent a valid measure of your knowledge or competence as sampled by the examination. The SPEX program may make such a determination when aberrancies in performance are detected for which there is no reasonable and satisfactory explanation. A classification of indeterminate may result from irregular behavior (see previous section) or from other factors, such as unexplained inconsistency in performance within an administration of the SPEX or between takes of the SPEX.

The performance of all examinees is monitored and may be analyzed statistically to detect aberrancies indicating that your scores may be indeterminate. In addition, evidence of irregular behavior may suggest that your scores do not represent a valid measure of your knowledge or competence as sampled by the examination. In these circumstances, your score report may be delayed, pending completion of further analysis and investigation. If your score report is delayed, you and any other party to whom scores would normally be reported will be notified. You will be provided with a copy of the SPEX policies and procedures that describe in detail the process for reaching final decisions regarding indeterminate scores. You will have an opportunity to provide information that you consider relevant.

After review and analysis of all available information, scores will be classified as valid and will be reported, or scores will be classified as indeterminate. If the scores are classified as indeterminate, you will be advised of the options for retaking the examination. Scores classified as indeterminate do not appear on your transcript; rather, an annotation indicates that the scores were classified as indeterminate. Scores classified as indeterminate will not be reported to anyone. Anyone who has received a report of scores that are later classified as indeterminate will be notified of the indeterminate classification.

If irregular behavior appears to have contributed to a decision that your scores are indeterminate, action may also be taken as described above.

## SCORE REPORTING

SPEX scores are released approximately two to four weeks following a test administration. For board-sponsored examinees, these scores will be reported to you and the board for which you took the SPEX. For self-nominated examinees, a score report will be sent only to the examinee. No score information will be provided via telephone, fax, or email. Any anticipated delay in score reporting due to activities by the SPEX program will be announced on the FSMB website at [www.fsmb.org](http://www.fsmb.org).

The FSMB maintains a computerized databank of all SPEX scores to facilitate licensure among jurisdictions. You may request that certified transcripts of your SPEX scores be forwarded to other licensing boards from which you are seeking licensure, to other appropriate credentialing agencies or organizations, or to yourself. Requests must be made online via the FSMB's website at <http://www.fsmb.org/transcripts/>.

If you do not receive your original score report, a request for a duplicate score report will be honored up to 90 days after your score report release date. You must make your request in writing to the FSMB (you may send an email to [spex@fsmb.org](mailto:spex@fsmb.org)). After 90 days, scores will be reported to you only in the form of an official SPEX transcript after you submit a transcript request and pay the required fee.

Examination data (including score information) from the SPEX may be used or made available to third parties for use in appropriate research projects that are disclosed to or authorized by you, as appropriate. In all instances, the data will be treated as confidential and individual examinees will not be identified or identifiable in any publication.

## SCORE RECHECKS

Standard quality assurance procedures ensure that the scores reported for each examinee are an accurate reflection of the responses recorded by the computer. A change in score based on a recheck is an extremely remote possibility. However, a score recheck may be requested in writing and submitted to the FSMB along with the required processing fee. Your request must be received by the FSMB no later than 90 days after your score was released. Contact FSMB at (817) 868-4041 or via email at [spex@fsmb.org](mailto:spex@fsmb.org) for instructions on how to submit the request and fee.

## REEXAMINATION PROCEDURES

Examinees are limited to 3 attempts at SPEX within a 12-month period. You may retake the exam after the initial attempt with no waiting period and submission of a new application and fee. A third attempt requires a mandatory 90-day waiting period from the second attempt. Any subsequent attempts require a one-year waiting period from the initial attempt and a 90-day waiting period from the previous attempt.

Board-sponsored examinees, at the sponsoring board's discretion, may not be subject to the same waiting periods. Any additional reexamination eligibility requirements and procedures for unsuccessful examinees are established by the individual licensing boards, pursuant to the boards' statutes and regulations.

*NOTE: The SPEX program considers the latest score achieved by an examinee to be the "official score" for the respective examination and has made recommendations to this effect to the individual licensing boards. However, the individual licensing boards are ultimately responsible for determining what scores within an examinee's history meet the board's examination requirements for licensure. Certified transcripts of SPEX scores provided to the licensing boards by the FSMB list all SPEX scores achieved for a given examinee.*

## GENERAL INQUIRIES

*Contact:*

Phone: 817-868-4041

Email: [spex@fsmb.org](mailto:spex@fsmb.org)

*Office hours:*

Monday – Friday

8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Central

*Mailing address:*

SPEX

Federation of State Medical Boards

400 Fuller-Wiser Road

Eules, TX 76039



# APPENDIX A

## Personal Item Exceptions (PIEs)

The personal items listed below are permitted in the secure testing area subject to inspection by test center staff. If you have a medical need for one or more of these items during your SPEX examination, you do **NOT** need to make a request or submit documentation to NBME for approval. Please show the item to test center staff when you check in for your examination.

### Medicine and Medical Devices

- Arm/shoulder sling
- Bandages
- Braces – neck, back, wrist, leg, or ankle
- Casts/cervical collar
- Cough drops (must be unwrapped and not in a bottle/container)
- Earplugs (foam with no strings)
- Epi-Pen
- Eye drops
- Eye patches
- Eyeglasses (without the case)
- Glucose monitor
- Glucose tablets
- Handheld magnifying glass (non-electric, no case)
- Ice packs/heating pads
- Inhaler
- Medical alert bracelet
- Nitroglycerin tablets
- Pillow/lumbar support
- Pills (must be unwrapped and not in a bottle/container)
- Stool for elevating a limb
- Surgical face mask
- Walking boot casts

### Medical Device Attached to a Person's Body

- Catheter
- Colostomy bag
- Heart rate monitor
- Insulin pump
- Oxygen tank
- Spinal cord stimulator
- TENS units
- Urine drainage bag

## Communication Aids

- Hearing aid/cochlear implant **without** Bluetooth/wireless capability
- Vocal cord magnifiers

## Mobility Devices

- Cane
- Crutches
- Walker
- Wheelchair

If you have a medical condition that requires use of an item **NOT** on the above list, contact the NBME Personal Item Exception (PIE) Coordinator at [pie@nbme.org](mailto:pie@nbme.org) or 215-590-9700 for additional information on how to request a personal item exception.