

Healthy test prep ^[1]

Dear Alice,

What is the best way to prepare, health wise, before a big test such as the SAT, LSAT, MCAT? What foods do you recommend to keep my "brain moving?"

Answer

Dear Reader,

Thinking about how to best fuel and train your body and mind can help you perform at your best, no matter what the challenge may be! In terms of your body and mind, routinely being physically active, getting adequate sleep, and training your mind with studying and test prep can help prepare your mind do its best. Fueling your body is also key. Maintaining a balanced diet that includes enough varied sources of vitamins, minerals, fiber, protein, and carbohydrates can help you out a great deal.

Eating a protein-rich diet before the test may help. The body breaks down protein into its building blocks, amino acids, one of which is tyrosine. The brain uses tyrosine to manufacture dopamine and norepinephrine, neurotransmitters believed to help increase alertness, mental acuity, motivation, and response time to challenges. Great dietary sources of protein include:

- Eggs
- Legumes
- Grains
- Non- or low-fat dairy products
- Seeds
- Nuts

The day before the test, it's helpful to eat full meals throughout the day. On the night before the test AND the morning of, you may want to consider eating a balanced meal that includes protein, healthy carbohydrates, and vegetables. It also may be helpful to stick to foods that you're familiar with and know won't upset your stomach. You may also want to keep the size of your meals consistent. If you eat a larger breakfast than your body is used to, your body could spend more energy trying to digest that meal on your test day instead of giving that energy to your brain to

enhance your performance. Getting in the habit of eating a similar breakfast around a similar time each day can help your body be ready for peak performance on your test day. If there are breaks throughout your exam, snacking can be a great way to maintain your energy and focus. You could try having a granola bar, nuts, dried fruits, or dark chocolate on hand, as well as plenty of water. If you're unsure how to best fuel your body for your needs, meeting with a registered dietitian may help you find the foods that work for you.

In addition to food, a balanced sleep routine is another key factor to consider in fueling your body. Sleep is one of the greatest tools your brain has to commit information to memory, improve focus and cognition, and set yourself up to be the most alert and able to perform on your test day. Some sleep tips you may consider are:

- Going to sleep and waking up at the same time each day and night (and getting into a regular sleep/wake time routine a few weeks before your test date).
- Creating a dark, cool sleep environment as free from noise as possible (using a sleep mask or dark blinds, and a white noise machine if the environment is typically noisy).
- Scheduling your sleep and wake times so that you can wake up at the end of a sleep cycle and feel the most refreshed and energized possible.

Of course, fueling your body is just part of the equation. You may find it useful to be physically active, as regular activity helps keep the mind alert, reduces fatigue, and facilitates a better night's sleep. Even just 20 minutes per day of moderate physical activity has been associated with improved sleep and overall cognitive functioning.

To train your mind, preparing well in advance of the test date in an effort to become familiar with the exam's content can help you feel more confident on the day of the test. It also may be worthwhile to implement a reasonable test preparation schedule. In addition, finding out how the test is conducted, its format, when it starts and ends, as well as at what time and for how long the breaks are will help you set your expectations and prepare adequately for those conditions. You may use this information to simulate the test day through timed and untimed practice tests. Untimed tests may help you build confidence in your proficiency of the content, as well as help you assess any gaps or difficulties to target in your preparation. If the real test is timed, timing practice tests can help you with time management, and, if you're running out of time before completing the practice test, this can help you strategize how to work more efficiently.

As another way to train your mind, you could consider using guided imagery. To do this, you can see yourself at the testing center: receiving your test, starting, how you'll be approaching the test, as some examples. Will you answer the questions in order, or will you do what you're most comfortable with first? Visualize what you'll do if you start feeling overwhelmed by the test. Closing your eyes, breathing deeply, and calming self-talk are strategies some people use. These relaxation techniques may be helpful if you start to get overwhelmed during the test, but remember to watch your time if the test is time-limited. Lastly, you may try some self-encouragement! If you prepared well in advance, having a positive attitude about your skills, preparation, and ability to get through the test may help with your performance as well. Some mantras to try include "I can do this!" or "I am prepared and ready!" If you find that you'd like additional guidance with the tools, you may find it useful to speak with a mental health professional. At the end of the day, if you've been fueling and training your body and mind in the

ways that feel right for you, all that's left is for you to try your best on the big day.

Good luck!

Alice!

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