

ABMS Board Eligibility Policies FAQs

Updated March 2019

The ABMS Board Eligibility Policy for Specialty Certification and the ABMS Eligibility Policy for Subspecialty Certification enable Member Boards to set parameters for how candidates can use the term "board eligible" as a way to signal their preparations for certification while at the same time closing off the potential for abuse through using the term indefinitely. The ability of a candidate to become board certified by an ABMS Member Board is directly related to when he or she completed an ACGME-accredited residency program (or its equivalent).

Board eligible applies only to the period of time prior to initial certification in a specialty or subspecialty. It is not in the best interests of the medical specialty, the credentialing community, patients or the public for board eligibility to remain open for an unspecified period of time.

What are the board eligibility periods according to the policies?

A candidate's eligibility for board certification (board eligible period) expires on a date determined by the ABMS Member Board. For initial certification in a specialty, that date must be no fewer than 3 and no more than 7 years following the successful completion of accredited training. For initial certification in a subspecialty, that date must be no more than 7 years following the candidate's successful completion of Member Board recognized subspecialty training. In addition, individual Member Board requirements must be met, including time in practice required (if any) for admissibility to the qualifying or certifying examination.

Why were these policies established?

Allowing an unrestricted status of "board eligible" denigrates the status of those physicians who already have achieved board certification. These policies tighten the connection between training and certification by limiting the period of time that may elapse between a physician's completion of an ACGME-accredited residency program and achievement of initial certification in a specialty or subspecialty. Research has shown that physicians can lose knowledge and skills as the years pass after their training. The requirements of ABMS Continuing Certification/MOC programs address this problem through continuing professional development.

Are there different board eligibility periods and transition dates for specialties and subspecialties? Is there a list I can review?

See the chart named "Board Eligible Periods and Transition Dates" in this document for this information. ABMS Member Boards with existing board eligibility policies aligned their board eligible periods with the principles of the established ABMS policies. Member Boards that did not have an existing policy in place established transition dates for their candidates.

Are there any exceptions to these limits?

The ABMS Member Boards may grant exceptions in instances of military deployment, acute illness, or other circumstances.

What happens if a physician's board eligibility lapses?

When a candidate's board eligibility lapses, the physician must cease and desist from making any representations of board eligibility. Any violation of this rule is considered a breach of ethical standards of medical practice. The candidate no longer is eligible for certification in that specialty or subspecialty without first completing all requirements for re-establishing board eligibility set by the particular ABMS Member Board. Entering into this process may not restore board eligibility status. Each board determines whether a candidate can represent themselves as board eligible during the period in which they are completing requirements. The physician will not appear in the ABMS database or on ABMS Solutions displays/products.

What is the process to re-establish board eligibility?

Requirements vary by Member Board and can include completion of pre-approved topic specific activities or modules, assessment of knowledge or practice performance, payment of fees, supervised practice, program director attestation, retraining in an accredited residency program for six months to one year or more. The Member Boards also may limit the number of times that a candidate can re-establish board eligibility. For specific questions regarding an individual physician, contact the appropriate Member Board.

Once re-established, how many additional years of eligibility does the physician have before initial certification must be achieved?

Once re-established, the ABMS Member Boards generally allow a candidate a single board eligibility period before initial certification in a specialty or subspecialty must be achieved. Contact the appropriate Member Board regarding specific questions about the duration of the re-established board eligibility period.

BOARD ELIGIBLE PERIODS AND TRANSITION DATES				
American Board of	SPECIALTIES		SUBSPECIALTIES	
	Board Eligible Period <i>(+practice requirement)</i>	Transition Date	Board Eligible Period <i>(+practice requirement)</i>	Transition Date
Allergy and Immunology	5 years	*	<i>No subspecialties</i>	
Anesthesiology	7 years	*	7 years	*
Colon and Rectal Surgery	7 years ¹	12/31/2023	<i>No subspecialties</i>	
Dermatology	5 years	*	5 years	*
Emergency Medicine	5 years	12/31/2019	7 years	*
Family Medicine	7 years	*	7 years	*
Internal Medicine	7 years	12/31/2019	7 years	*
Medical Genetics and Genomics	7 years	*	7 years	*
Neurological Surgery	3-4 years ²	*		1/1/2025
Nuclear Medicine	7 years	*	<i>No subspecialties</i>	
Obstetrics and Gynecology	7 (+1) years	*	8 years	1/1/2020
Ophthalmology	7 years	*	<i>No subspecialties</i>	
Orthopaedic Surgery	5 years ³	*	7 (+2) years ⁴	*
Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery	5 years	*		1/1/2025
Pathology	5 years	*	7 years ⁵	*
Pediatrics	7 years ⁶	*	7 years	*
Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation	7 years	12/31/2019	7 years	12/31/2020
Plastic Surgery	7 (+1) years	*	7 (+2) years ⁷	*
Preventive Medicine	7 years	*	7 years	*
Psychiatry and Neurology	7 years	*	7 years	*
Radiology	6 years	*	10 years	1/1/2025
Surgery	7 years	7/1/2022		1/1/2025
Thoracic Surgery	7 years ⁸	*	7 years ⁹	*
Urology	6 years	*	6 years ¹⁰	*

*The Member Board either had a policy in place prior to the effective date of the ABMS policy, or the transition date has passed.

¹ Colon and Rectal Surgery requires candidates to pass the written examination given by the American Board of Surgery. Candidates have 7 years to complete both the traditional and oral examinations after application approval.

² Neurological Surgery candidates completing residency training on or after 6/30/2011, but before 6/30/2017 must submit a completed application no later than 4 years after completing residency training. Those completing training on or after 6/30/2017 must submit no later than 3 years.

³ Orthopaedic Surgery candidates have 5 years to achieve certification after passing the traditional examination.

⁴ Orthopaedic Surgery allows a maximum of 9 years to complete certification in Surgery of the Hand. This policy also applies to Sports Medicine, pending review by the board.

⁵ Pathology eligibility period starts from the completion of subspecialty training or primary certification, whichever is later.

⁶ The board eligible period for Pediatrics is 7 years for those completing training in 2007 or later. For those completing training before 2017, the transition period ended on 12/31/2013.

⁷ Plastic Surgery allows a maximum of 7 years to complete certification after application, except for Surgery of the Hand which is 9 years.

⁸ Thoracic Surgery will accept a Vascular Surgery residency in lieu of a General Surgery residency as long as the Vascular Surgery training leads to primary certification by the American Board of Surgery.

⁹ Thoracic Surgery requires diplomates to apply within 1 year of completing training.

¹⁰ Urology allows a maximum of 3 years to complete certification after application.