

Conference Success Guide for Medical Students

**By the ACS Committee on Medical Student Education (CMSE)
Medical Student Task Force (MSTF)**

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INTRODUCTION

Conferences are valuable opportunities to learn from leaders in your field, present research, and build your professional network. For many medical students, attending a conference can feel intimidating, especially for the first time. This guide provides practical tips to help you prepare, make meaningful connections, and maximize your conference experience.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CONFERENCE

Before choosing a conference, identify your primary goal. Is it presenting research, networking, learning a specialty, developing new skills, or exploring career opportunities? Once you know your priorities, selecting the right meeting becomes much easier. Conference size also matters.

National meetings offer broader networking and educational opportunities, while regional meetings often provide a more intimate environment for meaningful conversations and mentorship. Both have unique advantages depending on your goals.

Ask mentors, senior students, or your institution for conference recommendations. Before registering, confirm eligibility requirements, membership discounts, and registration costs on the conference website.



MSTF Tip:

Consider joining national specialty organizations, such as the American College of Surgeons (ACS). Membership provides access to educational resources, mentorship, leadership opportunities, travel awards, and discounted registration for many meetings. Exploring these organizations early in medical school can help you throughout your training!

Learn more about ACS Medical Student Membership [here](#).

FINANCING YOUR TRAVEL

Register Early

Take advantage of early-bird registration rates whenever possible. Conference and society websites often offer discounted hotel accommodations and, occasionally, airfare through partner organizations. Reviewing these discounts early can significantly reduce travel expenses, so check the conference website when planning your trip.

Apply for Travel Funding

Many conferences, particularly those with medical student programming, offer competitive travel awards. The ACS, for example, provides travel grants for Clinical Congress to help offset airfare, lodging, and other expenses. Local specialty societies, ACS chapters, medical schools, and departments may also provide funding, with or without an abstract presentation requirement. Because applications are often due 3–6 months before the conference, begin searching early!



MSTF Tip:

Keep copies of all travel receipts and reimbursement documentation. Many travel awards, institutional reimbursements, and excused absences require proof of expenses.

Ask Your Institution

Funding may also be available through your research mentor, principal investigator, department, Office of Student Affairs, or Surgery Interest Group (SIG). If you're presenting research, ask whether departmental or grant funding is available to support conference travel.

Reduce Out-of-Pocket Costs

Travel with classmates to share lodging or transportation, take advantage of conference-sponsored meals, and consider staying with friends, family, or local faculty when appropriate. If the conference is within driving distance, driving is often less expensive than flying.

PROFESSIONALISM AND ATTIRE

Professional Expectations

For many medical students, a scientific conference is one of the first opportunities to practice professionalism outside the classroom. Remember that you are representing yourself, your institution, and the medical profession while interacting with peers, residents, faculty, mentors, and potential collaborators.

Professionalism extends beyond educational sessions to networking events, meals, and social gatherings. Your attire, communication, punctuality, and conduct all contribute to the impressions you leave and help establish your professional identity early in your career.



MSTF Tip:

Even informal networking events are professional spaces. The impressions you make at conferences can extend to residency recruitment, letters of recommendation, future collaborations, and fellowship opportunities.

Conference Attire

DAYTIME SESSIONS – Business professional or Business casual

Recommended Attire



- Dress shirt or polo (wrinkle-free, neutral colors)
- Slacks or chinos (avoid jeans)
- Blazer or suit
- Professional blouse or sweater
- Closed-toe dress shoes or clean loafers

Keep in mind: You'll likely spend much of the day walking, so choose comfortable footwear and avoid uncomfortable shoes!

SOCIAL EVENTS

Social events are still professional events. Faculty, residents, and potential mentors continue to form impressions outside of formal sessions, so when in doubt, dress slightly more professionally than you think is necessary.



Recommended Attire

- Smart casual (e.g., polo with slacks or a button-down shirt without a blazer)
- Dark-wash jeans may be appropriate if permitted by the event

Avoid

- Athletic wear
- Flip-flops or sandals
- Graphic T-shirts

What to Bring

Bring a notebook, pen, phone charger, and a professional bag that comfortably fits your daily essentials. Many conferences provide complimentary tote bags through exhibitors, but if you bring your own bag, choose one that is practical, comfortable to carry, and large enough to hold conference materials without being bulky.

During Educational Sessions

Phone & Device Etiquette

- Silence your phone before sessions begin.
- Avoid texting, scrolling, or other non-conference activities during presentations.
- Use devices purposefully for note-taking, reviewing abstracts, or following the conference schedule.
- Whenever possible, use a notebook instead of your phone for note-taking.

If you need to use your phone during a small-group session, consider asking, "Would it be okay if I use my phone to take notes?" This demonstrates professionalism and reassures the speaker that you are engaged rather than distracted.

Photography & Recording

- Always ask permission before photographing slides or recording presentations.
- Be mindful that presentations may include unpublished or confidential data.
- When in doubt, do not photograph or record content without explicit permission.

NETWORKING AND COMMUNICATION

Professional Networking

Conferences provide valuable opportunities to connect with fellow medical students, residents, fellows, faculty, and potential mentors. Be respectful of others' time and remember that many physicians are volunteering their time to meet with students in addition to attending the conference themselves.

Many conferences include dedicated networking sessions designed specifically for these conversations. Take advantage of these opportunities, but respect the conference schedule and avoid following residents or faculty after a session has concluded. If you have additional questions, ask whether they would be open to continuing the conversation at another time.

Networking conversations are an opportunity to learn about a specialty, career paths, research interests, and residency programs. Maintain professional communication throughout the conference, and avoid speaking negatively about residents, attendings, programs, fellow attendees, or conference sessions. Below, we have listed some strategies for conference networking:

01

Introduce

Prepare a 10-20 second introduction that includes your name, role, institution, and reason for attending the conference.

02

Connect

Build rapport by identifying shared interests or connections, such as research, institutions, mentors, or geographic ties.

03

Engage

Research individuals you hope to meet beforehand and ask thoughtful questions about their work, career path, or advice for someone at your stage.

Be mindful of others who may be waiting to speak with the same person. Even a brief conversation that includes a thoughtful introduction and an exchange of contact information can establish a meaningful professional connection.

Following Up After the Conference

Following up is an important part of professional networking. Within a few days of the conference, consider sending a brief thank-you email to individuals you connected with. Personalize your message by referencing your conversation and expressing appreciation for their time. The content of your email will naturally vary depending on the discussion and your stage of training.



Example Follow-Up Email

Hello Dr. Smith,

My name is Jane Doe, and I am a fourth-year medical student at [name of your medical school]. We met at the ACS Clinical Congress networking session on Sunday, October 13. It was wonderful meeting you and learning more about [name of residency program or another subject you spoke to them about]. I look forward to applying to this program and hope to keep in touch.

*Sincerely,
Jane Doe*

Be courteous and professional in all follow-up communication, and don't be discouraged if you do not receive a response. One polite follow-up email after 1–2 weeks is appropriate if needed but avoid sending repeated follow-up messages over several months. Unless explicitly invited, avoid contacting faculty or residents through personal social media

platforms such as Instagram or Facebook. If you would like to stay connected professionally, ask permission before sending a connection request on LinkedIn.



MSTF tip:

Aim for meaningful conversations rather than trying to meet as many people as possible. A few thoughtful interactions are often more memorable than dozens of brief introductions.

EDUCATION

Make a Plan

Beyond networking and presenting research, conferences are excellent opportunities to learn from experts across the field. As you progress through medical school and explore specialties, these educational sessions can help broaden your knowledge, expose you to new areas of interest, and guide your career development.

Before the conference, identify the sessions that best align with your interests and goals. Prioritize keynote addresses, specialty-specific lectures, skills workshops, and medical student programming, such as the ACS Committee on Medical Student Education Medical Student Program at Clinical Congress. Planning your schedule in advance helps ensure you make the most of your conference experience.

Take Meaningful Notes

Taking notes during sessions helps reinforce key concepts and provides a valuable resource to review after the conference. Whenever possible, use a notebook to minimize distractions and remain engaged. Whether you take notes on paper or electronically, choose a method that allows you to focus on the speaker rather than capturing every word.

Different types of talks can be approached differently with notetaking. In general, **less is more**. We advise students to focus on listening while only writing key ideas/information in bullet point format.

Research lectures are typically steeped with very fine details to the project; focus on the big takeaways and why their project matters in your field of interest. You can always see the details in the manuscript later.

Career lectures tend to focus on anecdotes, personal pathways/information, and generalizable themes. Rather than focusing on the individual story, note the patterns across key speakers (research, mentorship, key milestones, etc.) and focus on how you can apply these ideas into your current path.



Sample Note-Taking Outline

- 1. Talk Title/Speaker**
- 2. Big Question**
- 3. Key Takeaways**
- 4. Why it matters – Connect to Personal Goals**
- 5. Contact Information**

Review your notes a few days after the conference to consolidate key takeaways and identify next steps, including who to follow up with, topics to explore further, and opportunities to pursue (e.g., shadowing, research, rotations).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Before the Conference

- ✓ Set clear goals before attending.
- ✓ Research speakers and plan your schedule in advance.
- ✓ Apply for travel funding early.
- ✓ Pack professional attire and conference essentials.
- ✓ Prepare your elevator introduction.

During the Conference

- ✓ Dress professionally.
- ✓ Build meaningful professional connections.
- ✓ Take concise notes that capture key learning points.

After the Conference

- ✓ Send personalized follow-up emails.
- ✓ Reflect on your experience and apply what you learned.

CONCLUSION

The ACS Committee on Medical Student Education (CMSE) Medical Student Task Force thanks you for using this guide. We hope it has helped you prepare for your next conference and inspired you to make the most of every opportunity to learn, connect, and grow professionally. We wish you continued success throughout your medical training and look forward to seeing you at future ACS meetings!