The Medical Coding Exam Strategy!

Medical Coding Pro
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The Medical Coding Exam Strategy

Table of Contents

The Exam Strategy - What it is and what it isn’t 3

Reviewing Common Mistakes 4

The Exam Strategy 6

Keys to Success 7

Bonus Tips 9

Resources 10
The Medical Coding Exam Strategy

What it is and what it isn’t?

One of the first things we should discuss is what “The Strategy” is and what it isn’t.

**What it is:** A simple, yet powerful, method for increasing your chances of passing the Medical Coding Certification Exam. Many people have told us that time management was their biggest obstacle in passing the exam. This is what “The Strategy” addresses. It is a road map to pass the exam. It has very little to do with coding knowledge and everything to do with your approach.

**What it isn’t:** A long, drawn out, hard to follow maze with Medical Coding do’s and don’ts reviewing the material that was covered in class. We assume that you know the material, otherwise, it doesn’t matter what we teach you the odds are against you.

**Why it is important:** The reality is many people do not pass the exam the first time. This becomes a costly proposition and one that wasn’t bargained for because the next step is an exam retake. The cost: $300. Some even go further and sign up for a three day “boot camp”. The cost: about $1200.

**Between a rock and a hard place:** In this very typical example you passed the Medical Coding class with flying colors but the major hospitals and doctor offices all want a certified medical coder. Why, because it increases their output, makes them more money, and limits their liability for mistakes. So now you’re stuck. You have to get certified, but at what cost? It all depends how many times you have to take the certification exam. Follow the steps outlined in “The Strategy” and your next exam could reward you with a certification.
The Medical Coding Exam Strategy

Start by reviewing common mistakes:

Some of the most common mistakes made while taking the exam are what we like to call “time wasters”. The most important factor to succeeding is time management. You only have 5 hours and 40 minutes to complete the exam (including breaks) and it consists of 150 questions so every minute counts.

The time breakdown goes like this: Exam Time (without breaks) 5 hours or 300 minutes. Exam length: 150 Questions. The easy math is two minute per question. What can we eliminate to save time?

Things Not To Do:

- Answer each question in numerical order.
- Take too much time on difficult questions first.
- Read the doctors chart before reading the detail of the question.
- Not highlighting questions “passed” in the first round

Time Waster #1: Answering each question in numerical order. If you answer each question in numerical order you will never finish the exam! This is one of the most common mistakes made. If you start out answering the first several questions just fine and then ten questions into the exam you come to a one that you have trouble with, what then? This is a “time burner” and one you can not get hung up on. We will review why this is more important later in “The Strategy”.

Time Waster #2: Taking too much time on difficult questions the first time through the exam. “The Strategy” is based on a “two pass” system. The first pass is designed to answer the easy questions and highlight the more difficult ones. These will be addressed on the second pass. A good rule of thumb is if you can’t answer it in a minute and a half, move on! If you continue to work on these questions you run the risk of not completing the exam or having to rush through the more difficult questions at the end.
The Medical Coding Exam Strategy

Time Waster #3: Reading the doctors chart before reading the detail of the question. If you get caught in this “time waster” it will rob you of valuable minutes. Always read the question completely before reading the doctors chart. You may be able to eliminate much of the chart because the question is requesting limited information or specific detail.

Time waster #4: Not highlighting the more difficult questions for the second “pass”. Be prepared. Have a game plan and stick to it. Make sure that you highlight the more difficult questions that you are going to “pass” on in the first round of the exam. If you make the mistake of not highlighting these questions, you will lose valuable minutes trying to search for them in the second round.

Your goal is to answer the easier questions in a minute and a half maximum! Out of 150 questions, let’s assume you can answer 60%, or 90 questions, on the first pass averaging 1 ½ minutes per question. That is a total of 135 minutes to answer the first 90 questions. Again, this is an average. That leaves you with 165 minutes to answer the remaining 60 questions. That comes out to 2 ¾ minutes per question on the second pass! Now you can be more deliberate with the remaining, more difficult, questions to make sure you answer them correctly.

The “time wasters” have to be minimized or eliminated for you to be successful. Every minute you can save on looking up codes or moving more difficult questions to the second pass the closer you are to your certification.

Now let’s take an in depth look at the keys that will make all the difference in your exam experience. These are “The Strategy” and “The “Keys” to passing the Medical Coding Certification Exam! These are not difficult, complex strategies. These are straight forward, simple strategies that are easy to implement and highly effective. Follow each step and you will be well on your way to certification.
The Medical Coding Exam Strategy

The Exam Strategy:

1. **The basic element of the strategy** is making two passes through the exam. The first pass is to answer the questions you can complete in 1 ½ minute or less. This should be about 60% of the questions. If you can not answer a question in that time, highlight it (mark it for the second pass) and move on! That creates 2 ¾ minutes for the remaining 40% which you have identified as more difficult. This should leave you plenty of time on the more difficult questions and improve your overall score.

2. **Answer the easier questions in each section on the first pass.** You have to answer 70% (105) of the questions or better correctly to pass so answering the easier questions in each section will form a good base of correctly answered questions in all sections thus improving your chances of passing.

3. **UPDATE: We are leaving this tip in here but we are no recommending this tip. Use at your on risk. A handwritten** summary of your modifiers on an 8 ½ x 11” piece of paper and glue it into your ICD-9 book for quick reference. **This will save you valuable time!** This is information that is permitted in the exam. We are compiling the references onto one sheet to minimize “flipping” from one section to another for basic information.

4. **Identify the first three numbers of the code first.** This will help you eliminate answers instantly and narrow your choices for the correct answer. This is a big “time saver”. Practice this on your 150 question Medical Coding CPC Practice Exam.

5. **Read each question before reading the entire doctors chart.** Another big “time saver”! Don’t waste valuable time reading the entire doctors chart before reading the question. Read the entire question first to find out the specific information the question is requesting.

6. **Highlight Procedures one color, Diagnosis another color and Modifiers a third color** for quick reference (again, a big time saver!)
The Medical Coding Exam Strategy

The Keys to Success:

Key #1: Study and Preparation.

Don’t let anyone fool you into thinking that you don’t have to study. That is not the case. You NEED to study, and study hard! The Exam Strategy assumes that you know all the material. There are no shortcuts and The Exam Strategy will only help you pass if you know the material. So put in the time!

One of the best tools available to practice time management for the exam is the Medical Coding Exam System (www.MedicalCodingExamSystem.com). It is course dedicated strictly to time management. This will pay big dividends during the exam. We also highly the Exam Blitz DVD Series (www.TinyURL.com/BlitzVideos) for more extensive studying. You will quickly find it is worth its weight in gold.

Key #2: Two Complete Passes through the Exam.

During the exam you will be making TWO passes through the entire exam. Let me repeat this because it is at the heart of what we are trying to accomplish. During the exam you will be going through the entire exam twice! The first pass is to answer the easier questions and the second pass is to answer the more difficult ones. Many people do not pass the exam because they get caught up on a few difficult questions and end up not completing the entire exam. You must follow this key element as it is your key to success.

Key #3: Answer The First Pass Questions in 1 1/2 Minutes or Less.

Start the exam by making a first pass. During the first pass answer all the questions that you can complete in a reasonable amount of time (1 ½ minutes). If you can’t answer the question in 1 ½ minutes, highlight it and move on!

Key #4: Highlight All Unanswered Questions in First Pass

If you cannot answer a question within 1 1/2 minutes of the first pass, highlight the unanswered questions in yellow for easy reference during the second pass! Do not forget to highlight them as every second counts and this could be a big time saver!

Key #5: Answer the More Difficult Questions during Second Pass

You should complete the first pass in 135 minutes or less. This will establish a good base of answered questions and leave you with 165 minutes or more to go back and answer the highlighted questions.
The Medical Coding Exam Strategy

Key #6: Do Not Answer the Questions in Order, You Will Fail!
If you take your time and answer the first 120 questions perfect but run out of time and have to guess on the remaining 30 questions, YOU WILL NOT PASS. You must answer 105 questions correctly to pass the exam. (This has been revised to require a 70% pass rating on all questions combined!)

Key #7: Modifier Cliff Notes
Make a cliff notes copy of the modifiers on an 8 1/2" x 11" piece of paper. Cut it to size to match your ICD-9 book. Glue it into your IDC-9 book to keep it from falling out. These MUST be hand written or they will be taken away when you enter the exam (this is not taught in class, wink...wink). This information is permitted so use it. The cliff notes copy is a big “time saver” by minimizing the time it takes to flip from one section to another.

Key #8: Identify the First Three Numbers of the Code
Another good “time saver” is to identify the first three numbers of the code, turn to that page, then go to the sub code numbers.

Key #9: You Can Miss a Certain Percentage in each Section
You can miss a certain percentage in each section and still pass the exam. Your goal is to get enough right to pass. Making two complete passes through the exam will ensures that you are, at minimum, answering the easy questions in each section first. This alone will increase your chances of passing because you will have a base of questions answered in each section. Typically, the last section is rushed through. This will eliminate this hurdle.

Key #9: Read Each Question before Reading the Doctors Chart
Go over each question before you read the doctors chart. This will tell you exactly what you are looking for. You may not need to read the entire chart because the question only references a specific section. This will save you precious time.

Key #10: Highlight Procedures, Diagnosis, and Modifiers
Highlight the patient’s treatment/s in different colors for easy reference. I recommend using these colors: Yellow for Procedures, Blue for Diagnosis, and Pink for Modifiers.

Key #11: You Must Answer 70% correctly to pass (revised as noted above)
You must keep moving! Leave the tough questions and move on. Ask around to anyone who did not pass the exam the first time (or more) and see what they say. It’s all about time management and using the right tips and techniques. So to that end, if you do not follow any other advice, follow this! Do the easiest questions first.
The Medical Coding Exam Strategy

**Bonus Tips:**

1. Eliminate any answers that begin with an E-Code instantly! Cross it out...this will reduce your selection of answers.

2. Code injections with an administration charge.

3. Supervision and Interpretation components require physician supervision. In radiology procedures this means the radiologist has participated.

4. Know the difference between modifier 26 and modifier TC from your HCPCS II book.

5. Diabetes mellitus (code 250) – etiology code first then the manifestation code.

6. Trauma accident- always code the most severe injury first

7. Tab all your books including CPT, HCPCS Level II, ICD-9-CM, for quick reference.

8. Code burns on the depth of the burn (1\textsuperscript{st}, 2\textsuperscript{nd}, or 3\textsuperscript{rd} degree). Burns are classified to the extent of the body surface involved. Codes #948 (3\textsuperscript{rd} degree burn) the forth digit indicates the body surface involved. The fifth digit indicates the percent of body surface involved in 3\textsuperscript{rd} degree burns (see the rule of nines)

9. Multiple fractures, code by site and sequence by severity.

10. If the same bone is fractured or dislocated, code the fracture only.

11. If the question doesn’t state open or closed fracture, code as a closed fracture.

12. Late effects; is a residual of previous illness\ injury. Code the residual and then the cause. Reference “late” in the index.

13. Sequence symptoms first if no diagnosis.

14. Study Medicare A,B,C,D

15. Understand modifier 62 co-surgeons (look on exam for surgeon A and B)

16. KEEP MOVING, KEEP MOVING, AND KEEP MOVING!
The Medical Coding Exam Strategy

Resources

One of the most difficult challenges of taking the medical coding certification exam is finishing it in the allotted time. We have heard this from hundreds of medical coders. We have created a course to address this problem specifically. It is called the Medical Coding Exam System. If you are finding it difficult to finish the exam on time, don’t take a chance. Invest in sharpening your exam time management skills and pass the exam the first time.

Exam Study Products We Recommend

Medical Coding Exam Blitz DVD’s
http://TinyURL.com/BlitzVideos

Medical Coding Exam System
http://medicalcodingexamsystem.com

Medical Coding Exam Prep Course
http://www.medicalcodingpro.com/prep-course.html

Other Resources

Elite Members Area – 1 week trial for only $1
http://medicalcodingpro.com/join-us-elite-group.html

Medical Coding Pro – main website
http://medicalcodingpro.com

Continuing Education Units (CEU’s)
http://nanacast.com/vp/108527/44817/15225/

Monthly Question & Answer Webinar
http://nanacast.com/vp/108645/44817/15226/

Medical Coding Forum
http://nanacast.com/vp/109427/44817/15227/