



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Overview

CertLink® is a new alternative to the current exam for fulfilling continuing certification requirements. Diplomates will go online to a secure portal and answer 13 questions every 3 months. The process will be both educational and evaluative. Written references and online resources may be used while answering the questions and immediate feedback will be provided. There is no additional cost to participate. For more details, see the CertLink FAQs below.

What is CertLink and Why Now?

1. [What is CertLink?](#)
2. [What is different about CertLink?](#)
3. [Why is ABD offering CertLink now?](#)
4. [Who developed the CertLink program?](#)
5. [Who writes the dermatology-related questions in CertLink?](#)
6. [Are other ABMS Member Boards implementing CertLink, too?](#)
7. [How will the ABD determine whether CertLink is an improvement upon the traditional continuing certification exam—in other words, how will ABD determine if the program is successful?](#)

Registration, Cost and Timing

8. [When will the CertLink program begin?](#)
9. [How does a diplomate register to participate in CertLink?](#)
10. [What is the cost to participate in CertLink?](#)
11. [Does participation in CertLink provide CME credit?](#)
12. [How will the ABD manage initial CertLink enrollment for diplomates in varying stages of their continuing certification cycle?](#)
13. [How does CertLink ensure that questions delivered to diplomates are relevant to their practice?](#)

Diplomate Participation

14. [On average, how much time do diplomates spend preparing for CertLink assessments?](#)
15. [On average, how much time each month do diplomates spend answering CertLink questions?](#)
16. [Can diplomates use references when answering CertLink questions?](#)
17. [Will I need a subscription to access journals for the article-based questions?](#)
18. [How frequently do diplomates need to answer CertLink questions?](#)
19. [Does the CertLink system send me reminders to answer my questions?](#)
20. [What types of CertLink questions do diplomates receive?](#)
21. [How much time does a diplomate have to answer each CertLink question?](#)
22. [What should I do if I have a question, or experience a technical difficulty with using the system?](#)
23. [What happens if life events prevent me from participating in CertLink for a period of time?](#)
24. [How can diplomates offer feedback about CertLink?](#)
25. [If I participate in CertLink, will I no longer have a personalized table \("MyMOC Table"\) on ABDerm.org to track my continuing certification activities?](#)
26. [What if I ever chose to quit CertLink?](#)

Subspecialty Information

27. [Is CertLink any different if a diplomate has a subspecialty certification?](#)

Scoring, Passing Standard, Certification, Security

28. [What is the minimum number of years of using CertLink that will qualify as an exam alternative?](#)
29. [What are the participation and performance requirements for CertLink?](#)
30. [How will the passing standard be established?](#)
31. [Can I lose my certification through CertLink?](#)
32. [At what point in my continuing certification cycle is it determined whether I have met the CertLink criteria to maintain board certification?](#)
33. [If I am performing well in CertLink, do I need to take any other sit-down ABD examination for the purpose of maintaining my certificate?](#)
34. [How are the security of assessment scores and diplomates' personal information addressed?](#)

Special Circumstances

35. [My current continuing certification cycle is 10 years. Is it possible that this could change?](#)
36. [What happens to CertLink if ABMS adopts new recommendations for continuing certification based on the recent "The Continuing Board Certification: Vision for the Future" Commission Report?](#)

What is CertLink® and Why Now?

1. What is CertLink®?

CertLink is a new assessment model that provides an alternative to the existing exam component of the Board's continuing certification program.

CertLink prioritizes ongoing, lifelong learning by delivering small batches of questions at periodic intervals through an online portal to assess diplomates' clinical knowledge and helps fill knowledge gaps through real-time feedback.

CertLink's *longitudinal approach to assessment* allows physicians to spend a few hours each quarter answering questions, at a time and place of their choosing and convenience, to demonstrate their proficiency in the specialty. It's an approach supported by contemporary adult learning theory: learning is best fostered through a continuous assessment of knowledge.

2. What is different about CertLink?

CertLink differs from the traditional continuing certification exam in format and convenience by offering opportunities for diplomates to:

- Answer test questions in smaller batches over time;
- Utilize written references and online resources while answering questions;
- Assess knowledge of content relevant to their practice;
- Answer article-based questions that keep them up-to-date with the best available, practice-changing publications;
- Access the platform via computer (laptop or desktop), tablet, or smartphone – for the best experience, it's recommended that diplomates use a computer or tablet;
- Complete test questions at times and locations that are convenient;
- Compare performance to that of peers;
- Identify areas of deficiency that can be addressed over time;
- Get immediate, focused feedback and guidance to resources for further study; and
- Use a personal dashboard that displays areas of strength, as well as knowledge gaps.

Diplomates who tried CertLink report that it is more convenient than the continuing certification exam and causes much less stress and anxiety.

3. Why is ABD offering CertLink now?

We listened to diplomate feedback about the existing continuing certification exam and are committed to improving upon that model.

CertLink provides a process that is both educational as well as evaluative.

- This new exam alternative includes questions based on top articles from the recent dermatology literature. It addresses the reality that knowledge in our specialty advances at a rapid pace.
- As in actual clinical practice, written references and online resources may be used while answering the questions. However, colleagues may not be consulted.
- Immediate written feedback is provided about the correct answer and the incorrect alternatives, whether the diplomate answers the question correctly or not.

- Over the year, the CertLink system provides each diplomate with variants of important questions that he or she missed, allowing each participant to document learning.

We spent more than a year testing the CertLink program internally and piloting it with more than 400 dermatology diplomates. We will continue to solicit diplomate feedback about it as the program unfolds and incorporate necessary changes into the platform made available to all diplomates. The goal is to deliver on our promise of providing a continuing certification program that meets the unique needs of dermatologists, in a fashion that can be tailored to the needs of individual diplomates in all our subspecialties.

Our goal is that CertLink – with its relevance, simplicity, convenience and flexibility – will be a valuable alternative to the existing continuing certification exam for all dermatology diplomates.

4. Who developed the CertLink program?

Beginning in 2016, the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) collaborated with many of its Member Boards, including ABD, to develop the CertLink platform. ABD Directors, as well as more than 400 diplomate volunteers, have tested and tailored the CertLink program to make it specific to dermatology and its subspecialties during the pilot phases of implementation. We will continue to solicit diplomate feedback about CertLink as the program unfolds.

5. Who writes the dermatology-related questions in CertLink?

Volunteer members of ABD's test committees—dermatologists themselves with diverse types of practice—write and refine the CertLink questions.

6. Are other ABMS Member Boards implementing CertLink, too?

We and other ABMS Member Boards believe that ongoing, longitudinal assessment is the future of physician assessment. This is supported by contemporary adult learning theory that learning is best fostered through a continuous assessment of knowledge. To that end, many Member Boards have implemented, or are considering implementing, CertLink, including ABD.

7. How will the ABD determine whether CertLink is an improvement upon the traditional continuing certification exam—in other words, how will ABD determine if the program is successful?

We will assess how relevant the program is for all diplomates and how flexible it is with regards to their already busy schedules, in addition to other factors, when evaluating the success of the CertLink program. For more information about how diplomates can provide feedback, see FAQ #14.

Some details of the program may evolve over time as we listen to diplomate feedback and ensure that CertLink meets their needs as best it can.

Our goal is to deliver a continuing certification program that meets the unique needs of diplomates and helps patients get the best possible dermatological care.

Registration, Cost and Timing

8. When will the CertLink program begin?

ABD plans to offer the CertLink program to all dermatology diplomates in January 2020.

9. How does a diplomate register to participate in CertLink?

Diplomates who wish to participate in the January 6, 2020 CertLink launch **must enroll by November 15, 2019**. To do so, please complete this [short form](#).

10. What is the cost to participate in CertLink?

Currently, there is no separate fee for the traditional continuing certification exam or CertLink. The costs of each – whichever option diplomates choose – are covered by the annual continuing certification fee.

11. Does participation in CertLink provide CME credit?

Yes, the AMA has approved one credit per article-based question answered, up to a total of 12 credits per year.

12. How will the ABD manage initial CertLink enrollment for diplomates in varying stages of their continuing certification cycle?

Any physician certified by the ABD may enroll in CertLink during the 2020-2022 transition period. At present, ABD plans to continue offering the traditional exam for those who prefer it. After the transition period, diplomates may continue to opt into CertLink at any time. In all cases, there will be two entrance dates each year, January 1 and July 1. Diplomates who sign up to join CertLink by November 15 will begin on January 1, and those who sign up by May 15 will begin on July 1.

The initial enrollment process will vary for diplomates based on where they are in their continuing certification cycle.

- **Diplomates with a continuing certification cycle ending in 2019:**
After taking and passing the traditional continuing certification exam to conclude their current continuing certification cycle, diplomates will be automatically enrolled in CertLink for their 2020-2029 cycle. Diplomates actively participating and performing satisfactorily in CertLink will not need to take another traditional continuing certification exam.
- **Diplomates with a continuing certification cycle ending between 2020-2024:**
Diplomates with a certificate expiring within the next 5 years can either take and pass the traditional continuing certification exam to fulfill the 'Assessment' requirement for their current continuing certification cycle OR they can enroll in CertLink by the end of 2021. Diplomates actively participating and performing satisfactorily in CertLink will not need to take the traditional continuing certification exam. Active participation requires answering all assigned questions per quarter for at least 3 quarters per year.
- **Diplomates with a continuing certification cycle ending between 2025-2029:**
Diplomates in the first 5 years of their continuing certification cycle can either take and pass the traditional continuing certification exam before the end of their current cycle OR they can enroll in CertLink by the end of 2022. Diplomates actively participating and

performing satisfactorily in CertLink will not need to take the traditional continuing certification exam. Active participation requires answering all assigned questions per quarter for at least 3 quarters per year.

- **Newly certified diplomates with a continuing certification cycle starting in 2020 and beyond:**
Starting in 2020, each cohort of newly certified diplomates will be automatically enrolled in CertLink.
- **Diplomates with a non-time-limited certificate who voluntarily participate in continuing certification:**
Diplomates with a non-time-limited certificate can either take and pass the traditional continuing certification exam OR they can enroll in CertLink before January 2022. See FAQ #20 for details about maintaining subspecialty certification if you hold a non-time-limited dermatology certificate.

13. How does CertLink ensure that questions delivered to diplomates are relevant to their practice?

Diplomates may select a portion of their questions from a variety of concentration areas, including medical dermatology, pediatric dermatology, surgical dermatology, dermatopathology and cosmetic dermatology.

In addition, after each question is answered, information will be gathered from the diplomate about that question's relevance to his or her practice using a simple response scale. This will provide the test-writing committees with information about the collective relevance of each question, allowing future modifications to question content to better reflect what is relevant to current dermatology practice.

Diplomate Participation

14. On average, how much time do diplomates spend preparing for CertLink assessments?

The activities in which most practicing dermatologists already participate – e.g., seeing patients, reading journal articles, attending conferences, participating in grand rounds, etc. – should help them answer CertLink questions. CertLink questions delivered to diplomates are designed to be as relevant to their scope of practice as possible. Beyond reading the specific articles designated for the article-based questions (see FAQ #20), no special preparation is needed to begin a CertLink assessment – the preparation needed for CertLink assessments is work that diplomates are already doing on a regular basis to stay up-to-date with the latest clinical advances.

15. On average, how much time each month do diplomates spend answering CertLink questions?

The time required to answer CertLink questions will vary from diplomate to diplomate. During the pilot phases participating diplomates spent, on average, about one hour per month participating in CertLink.

16. Can diplomates use references when answering CertLink questions?

Written references and online resources may be used while answering the questions. However, colleagues may not be consulted.

17. Will I need a subscription to access journals for the article-based questions?

No, you will not need a journal subscription to access any of the articles for your assessment. Once you click on an article link, the platform will direct you to the article without requiring the use of a password.

18. How frequently do diplomates need to answer CertLink questions?

Diplomates will receive 52 new questions per year in CertLink, organized into quarterly assignments of 13 questions. To receive credit, diplomates must answer their 13 questions before the end of each quarter.

Furthermore, diplomates will receive additional “repeat questions” each quarter for all questions answered incorrectly in the prior quarter, as well as for questions answered correctly but flagged “not at all confident.” These “repeat questions” will be similar in words and concept to those answered incorrectly and will provide a chance for a diplomate to respond correctly and demonstrate that he or she has subsequently learned the information. Only the second response is scored; the original attempt will not be counted. At most, diplomates would have to answer 26 questions in a quarter – 13 new questions and 13 “repeat questions,” – in the unlikely event that the entire set of questions from the prior quarter was answered incorrectly.

Finally, if desired, once per year, a diplomate may use CertLink’s “Time Off” feature to opt out of answering a quarter’s worth of questions. Time off can be designated in advance of a quarter, or at any point before the end of the current quarter. Alternately, a diplomate who does not opt out of a quarter in a given year will have his or her lowest performing quarter dropped from scoring.

19. Does the CertLink system send me reminders to answer my questions?

CertLink sends regular email reminders to diplomates, indicating how many questions have been answered in the current quarterly segment, and how many questions remain. If a diplomate prefers reminders by text instead of email, this can be configured in the “My Account” portion of the CertLink platform.

20. What types of CertLink questions do diplomates receive?

Of the 52 primary questions provided each year to a diplomate, three different types are provided as follows:

- 24 Core (image-based) questions
Each question consists of a photographic image of a skin disease with the query “Which of the following is the most likely diagnosis?” These are just like the questions in the General Dermatology Module of the continuing certification exam. Individuals with non-

time-limited certificates, who voluntarily participate in the ABD's continuing certification program and wish to maintain only subspecialty certification, are waived of the requirement to answer Core questions.

- 12 Concentration (specialty) questions

These are similar to questions in the existing continuing certification exam Elective Modules. At the beginning of every year, each diplomate will choose which types of subspecialty questions s/he wishes to receive that year: medical, pediatric, dermatopathology, surgery and cosmetics. Diplomates without subspecialty certification will answer 12 concentration questions yearly. Diplomates are able to “pick and choose” the number of questions they wish to receive from each category, to better reflect the composition of their patient practice. For example:

- Example 1: 12 medical, 0 surgical, 0 pediatric, 0 cosmetic
- Example 2: 6 medical, 2 surgical, 3 pediatric, 1 cosmetic

Individuals with subspecialty certification answer 24 concentration questions yearly (and only 12 core questions), and half of their 24 subspecialty questions consist of a subspecialist “level 2” category of questions.

- 16 Article-Based questions

This new concept consists of questions based on important articles in the recent literature. The articles are organized and presented by subspecialty – medical, pediatric, dermatopathology, surgery and cosmetics – but each diplomate may “pick and choose” among the articles and answer questions about whichever articles they wish. Eight articles (each with two associated questions) are selected by a diplomate at the beginning of each year, and then the system assigns two of those articles to that diplomate each quarter. Diplomates follow a link to the chosen article, download (if desired) and read it at their leisure, and then return to the CertLink platform when they are ready to receive the questions about it.

As with the other question types, if a question is answered incorrectly a “repeat” question will be delivered the next quarter, along with the article for review. All articles are provided without cost or subscription to every diplomate.

21. How much time does a diplomate have to answer each CertLink question?

A diplomate will have 10 minutes to answer each test question.

22. What should I do if I have a question, or experience a technical difficulty with using the system?

CertLink users can contact the ABD for technical assistance through any of the following methods:

- a) Click the green “Need Help” icon in the top right corner of the CertLink dashboard and submit a ticket.
- b) Send an email to ABDerm@mycertlink.org.
- c) Call the ABD Office at 617.910.6400 during weekday business hours.

Diplomates who experience a technical interruption while answering a question (and thereby have the question marked incorrect) can request that a question be reset to allow another attempt.

23. What happens if life events prevent me from participating in CertLink for a period of time?

Once a year, diplomates may use CertLink's "Time Off" feature to be excused from one quarter's worth of questions. This time off can be requested in advance of a quarter, or at any point before the end of the current quarter. To do so, the diplomate must activate the Time Off feature so that the system knows the quarter is being taken off. Diplomates in need of a more extended leave of absence from CertLink should contact the ABD to create a plan to suit their individual circumstances.

24. How can diplomates offer feedback about CertLink?

Diplomates have several ways to provide feedback about CertLink:

- 1) *First*, after each test question is answered, information will be gathered from the diplomate about that question's relevance to his or her practice using a simple response scale. Over time, test-writing committees will receive information about the collective relevance of each question. This will allow future modifications to question content to better reflect what is relevant to current dermatology practice.
- 2) *Second*, after submitting a response to each question, diplomates are shown the correct answer along with an explanation. This page contains a "Feedback" button to send comments to the ABD about the item.
- 3) *Third*, there will be opportunities throughout the year to answer ABMS surveys (which are completely optional) to share opinions and note any problems in order to help improve CertLink functionality for diplomates.
- 4) *Finally*, a diplomate may contact the ABD office directly at any time by email or phone, to discuss an issue, concern or suggestion related to CertLink.

When there are a significant number of concerns about a question, it will be reviewed by the test committee to determine whether it should be modified or eliminated. If the question is determined to be not valid, it will be removed from scoring and the diplomate's score will be adjusted.

25. If I participate in CertLink, do I no longer have a personalized table ("MyMOC Table") on ABDerm.org to track my continuing certification activities?

Diplomates will continue to track and monitor their progress with all continuing certification activities on the ABDerm.org website. For diplomates enrolled in CertLink, we will make a notation on the table to demonstrate CertLink participation.

26. What if I chose to quit CertLink?

If a diplomate ever wishes to quit the CertLink process, he or she may do so, but he or she will then need to take the continuing certification exam before the end of his or her continuing certification cycle.

Subspecialty Information

27. Is CertLink any different if a diplomate has a subspecialty certification?

Individuals *without* subspecialty certification answer 6 Core (image-based), 4 article-based and 3 subspecialty-specific Concentration questions each quarter. Individuals *with* subspecialty

certification answer 3 Core (image-based), 4 article-based and 6 subspecialty-specific Concentration questions each quarter, and half of their Concentration questions are a harder “level 2” category of questions. (See FAQ #20 for more details.)

In addition, *individuals with non-time-limited certificates*, who voluntarily participate in the ABD's continuing certification program and wish to maintain only subspecialty certification, are waived of the requirement to answer Core questions.

Scoring, Passing Standard, Certification, Security

28. What is the minimum number of years of using CertLink that will qualify as an exam alternative?

CertLink is designed to be an ongoing process. Thus, it is anticipated that CertLink participation will take place throughout each diplomate's continuing certification cycle.

29. What are the participation and performance requirements for CertLink?

During the first four years of CertLink enrollment, a diplomate must meet a minimum participation requirement by answering questions on a quarterly basis, with an option to opt out of one quarter annually. The CertLink annual assessment consists of 52 questions (13 per quarter). With the option to abstain from one quarter per year, diplomates must answer at least 39 questions per year in order to meet the CertLink participation requirements.

After four years of CertLink participation, A “Look Back” will occur in which performance will be initially evaluated. The timing of this “Look Back” is based on the need to have adequate item performance data to make an assessment. At that point, each actively participating diplomate will receive feedback that will include whether the diplomate is on-track to adequately fulfill Certlink criteria. Those not on-track will receive advice for improving performance

To help diplomates monitor their own CertLink progress, a dashboard provides a real-time display of the number of questions answered and the percent correct score.

The system's delivery of “repeat questions” impacts a diplomate's performance data. After submitting an incorrect response to a question, a diplomate receives feedback to help fill the knowledge gap and will then receive a very similar question (a “repeat question”) the following quarter. If the “repeat question” is answered correctly, diplomates receive full credit for the correct answer. Only the second response is scored; the original attempt does not count.

Additionally, performance data is impacted by skipped questions. If a diplomate skips questions within a segment or skips a segment entirely without formally opting out of a quarter, those questions are marked incorrect. However, diplomates have a chance to rectify the skipped questions when they are delivered the following quarter as very similar “repeat questions.”

30. How will the passing standard be established?

The ABD, under the guidance of a psychometrician, will conduct a standard setting exercise to determine the passing standards of its exam. This is the same process the ABD uses with its current MOC exam. The standard is "criterion-based," meaning that all diplomates can pass if they meet the standard. There is no pre-defined failure rate, that is, there is no "curve" used to determine a passing standard.

31. Can I lose my certification through CertLink?

Similar to the current process, it is possible for diplomates to fall short of continuing certification assessment requirements in CertLink and to lose certification. However, CertLink is not based on a one-time exam. Instead, CertLink takes a longitudinal assessment approach that allows diplomates to track their status easily and help them identify any clinical knowledge gaps to fill. "Repeat questions" allow each diplomate a second chance to answer correctly every question answered initially incorrectly.

32. At what point is it determined whether I have met the CertLink criteria to maintain board certification?

To determine whether diplomates have fulfilled CertLink criteria to maintain board certification, each diplomate will need to answer an adequate number of questions over time to render a psychometrically valid assessment of his or her performance. One key "Look Back" point will occur after four years of participation. At that point, each actively participating diplomate will receive feedback that will include whether the diplomate is on-track to adequately fulfill Certlink criteria. Those not on-track will receive advice for improving performance.

The exact time required to render final assessment is still unknown. The ABD is working with other member boards and leadership at the ABMS to determine more uniform cycle length requirements across all ABMS boards. If the ABMS mandates change to a shorter cycle length, we recognize the possibility that a shorter continuing certification cycle may be required in the future. If our current cycle length must be shortened, diplomates will be notified years in advance. In addition, any diplomate who has performed inadequately on CertLink will have the opportunity to take the traditional exam as a final option to continue certification.

33. If I am performing well in CertLink, do I need to take any other sit-down ABD examination for the purpose of maintaining my certificate?

No.

34. How are the security of assessment scores and diplomates' personal information addressed?

Like all matters related to diplomates' assessment scores and personal information, ABD makes the privacy and security of that information one of its highest priorities.

Specific to CertLink, longitudinal assessments represent an evolution from traditional, point-in-time secure exams. While the nature and format of longitudinal assessment does not conform to traditional examination security measures, the longitudinal format and design should help mitigate concerns of unauthorized assistance in answering questions.

With the help of ABMS, we will evaluate several additional security measures moving forward.

Ultimately, diplomates are professionals and it is essential that they hold each other to the standards of professionalism listed in the CertLink End User License Agreement.

Special Circumstances

35. My current continuing certification cycle is 10 years. Is it possible that this could change?

Yes. The ABMS is redefining the standards for continuing certification, and one key area concerns establishing a more uniform continuing certification cycle length across the ABMS member boards. The ABD does not yet know what that standard will be, but strongly anticipates cycle lengths will be less than 10 years, and most likely around 5 years. Should this happen, there would be NO impact to diplomates actively participating and adequately performing in CertLink. However, diplomates not participating in CertLink would expect to take the traditional exam sooner than 10 years. Changes impacting CertLink non-participants will be communicated years in advance of the testing deadline.

36. What happens to CertLink if ABMS adopts new recommendations for continuing certification based on the recent "The Continuing Board Certification: Vision for the Future" Commission Report?

The CertLink platform for ABD's longitudinal assessment has been built with the understanding that changes may result in certification based on feedback from the Commission report. Regardless of how continuing certification changes in the next couple years, longitudinal assessment will remain a tool used by member boards of ABMS, and ABD has chosen the CertLink platform for that function.