



The Couples Match Emergency Medicine Applying Guide

**Caitlin Schrepel MD, Katie Harter, MD, Heather Streich, MD, Emily Hillman, MD, Adam Kellogg, MD, Alexis Pelletier-Bui, MD and J.V. Nable, MD
on behalf of the CORD Advising Students Committee in EM (ASC-EM)**



<https://unsplash.com>

The purpose of this applying guide is to provide some insight into the process of couples matching. This guide is intended for applicant pairs where one or both students plan to apply to Emergency Medicine (EM).

General overview

The National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) gives any two people the opportunity to match to residency by linking their rank lists together. In 2020, 2,448 applicants participated in the couples match process (for all specialties), with 95.6% successfully matching.¹

If you couples match, you will apply and interview separately, but when you create your rank list, you will create linked combinations from your partner's list. You will both then match at the highest rank combination in which both partners have been accepted. You can designate that you are applying as a couple in the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS), but you do not have to officially decide on couples matching until you submit your final rank list.² You cannot undergo a couples match if one partner is pursuing an early matching specialty, such as ophthalmology, or if someone is participating in the Military Match.

Prior to applying as a couple it will be important to set expectations. The process can be expensive, time consuming, and extra stressful. It is important to meet with your medical student advisor in advance to discuss the process and determine appropriate goals based on your specific situation. You will also need to take into account that you and your partner may not be evenly matched in terms of competitiveness and this may influence the number of programs to which you or your partner apply.³

Before you apply

This may seem obvious, but it is important to have a conversation with your partner and advisor about your professional and personal goals and determine in advance whether you would rather go *unmatched* or match to different programs and/or cities. This is important whether or not your partner is your spouse, significant other, life partner, or best friend. Talk with your advisors separately and as a couple to come up with appropriate goals.³

- What does couples matching mean to you?
- What compromises are you willing to make?
- What compromises are you **not** willing to make?
- Is this the right choice for you and your partner?

Other tips:

- If your partner is interested in a program in a particular city, consider doing an away rotation there.
- If your partner is applying to a more competitive specialty, or if you are applying broadly geographically, consider more than one out of town rotation. Typically,

for the average EM applicant, we recommend 2 EM rotations (one at home and one elective); however, this might be an instance in which you can justify an additional rotation.

The application

You are not required to disclose to programs that you are couples matching and you can wait until you are making your final rank list to officially decide to couples match or not. No one will know unless you tell them. You can tell programs in several ways (on the ERAS application, in your personal statement, during the interview and/or in follow-up or thank you letters). If you are still undecided about couples matching at the time of filing the ERAS application, you should hold off as you *will* get asked about your partner if it is on your application. Applicants often wonder if there is any benefit or risk to telling programs that you are couples matching. In general, the attitude within the emergency medicine community is that the benefits probably outweigh the risks for most couples.

- Some potential benefits of disclosing couples match:
 - May be able to coordinate interviews. This is less of a concern with virtual interviews where travel costs don't factor in, but still nice to be able to compare notes with your partner in real time.
 - Possibility for one program to lobby for an applicant's partner: For example, if your partner's program of choice really likes them, that program may lobby your program of interest to offer you an interview or even rank you higher on their list. In fact, according to a recent ASC-EM survey, 76.2% (CI 67.9-84.5%) of those involved in the interview process report speaking to the program director of the other program and 43.6% (CI 33.9-53.2%) report moving an applicant up or down on the rank list because they were matching with a resident in another program.⁵
 - When your interviewer asks you why you want to move to that particular city or be part of a particular program, in addition to the reasons you like their program, you may be able to say that your partner enjoyed their interview day, has family in the area, etc.
- Some potential risks:
 - If you are both applying to EM, small programs may prefer not to take applicants from the same school/city.
 - If you are both applying to EM, programs may be concerned about whether potential relationship strife may cause issues for the program. However, most programs will still consider matching an EM-EM couple to their program.⁵
 - If you are still on the fence about couples matching, programs will be treating you as a couple anyway. This may change your rank on their list even though you decide in the end not to enter the couples match.

In general, each partner applying to EM should aim to interview at and rank at least 12-15 programs. The number of programs to which you and your partner need to apply to will depend on both partners' competitiveness within their chosen specialty. That may mean applying to 25 programs for an EM/IM couple and 40+ programs for an EM/Dermatology couple. According to a ASC-EM survey, the majority of faculty who advise EM bound students entering the match as a couple recommend applying to somewhere between 31-50 programs. And 21% advise applying to over 50 programs.⁵

- If one partner is not as competitive, and it is more important to match somewhere than to match in your preferred specialty, consider a parallel application to a preliminary year (if your intention would be to re-apply to EM the following cycle) or to a categorical position in another traditionally less competitive specialty, such as IM or Family Medicine, if your ultimate career goals can be achieved through another training path.

There are some additional points worth considering when applying to programs:

- Some cities are great for couples matching because they have multiple programs in many specialties: i.e. Boston, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia.
- You may be able to couples match in nearby cities if there is a midway point that is livable and easily accessible to both programs.
- Consider in advance if you and your partner want to be at the same hospital, or if different hospitals in the same city would be acceptable or even preferable.
- If you are both applying to EM, think about if you want to be in the same program (which can be tricky, especially in smaller programs). Residency programs have various experience with and enthusiasm for matching EM-EM couples. In a recent survey of program directors 88.3% (CI 82.2-94.5%) stated they would consider matching a EM-EM couple.⁵

Program (Preference) Signaling and the couples Match

With the 2022-2023 program signaling pilot within EM, you are probably wondering how to best utilize your tokens. Please review the [AAMC's](#) and [CORD's](#) general advice and guides to familiarize yourself with an overview of the process. There is no data to offer any evidence-based advising as far as how participating in the couples match should affect your signaling strategy. The guiding principle of only signaling programs where you would be excited to interview still applies. If your application will be very geographically spread out, program signals can be a good way to effectively indicate interest in a program and increase your chance of an interview when there might not be any other obvious connection in your application. An argument could be made to signal a single program in multiple different metropolitan areas as well as to signal multiple training programs concentrated in a single metropolitan area. If your partner is also applying in a specialty utilizing signal tokens, discuss your strategy so that your choices and your partner's choices are complimentary.

The interview:

Making it to interview day is a huge step - congratulations! Programs should *not* be asking you if you are married/engaged/dating, but if you indicated in your application that you are couples matching, they can ask you about the other member of the couple. You are welcome to discuss your relationship status if you choose to but do not lie on the interview trail.

Other tips:

- Most programs report trying to coordinate interviews for a matching couple,⁵ so if your partner gets an interview at a program you have applied to and you have not heard from that program, you should email them to check-in on your application status so that you can maximize your chance of interviewing.
- If your partner has personal connections to a city or program not otherwise evident on your own application, bring this up in the interview or when contacting the program to follow-up on your application.

The Match list

This is often the most stressful part of couples matching. It is worth revisiting your priorities. ERAS allows you to enter up to 700 linked combinations. It takes a lot of organization to rank such a large list of programs. As you figure out how to compromise, here are some things to consider:

- Make your lists individually before comparing them to get a starting point.
- When making your rank list, try to organize by cities/geography rather than organizing by individual programs.
- What are your priorities?³
 - Living together: If there are multiple programs centered around one city consider how far you are comfortable driving every day to work.
 - Both matching as close to their top choice as possible: you rank top choice programs first keeping in mind how far away you are willing to live.
 - Getting one partner into a particular program: rank this partner's number one choice with all possible combinations of the other partner's list prior to moving on to the first partner's second choice.
 - Are you willing to have both partners go unmatched? If not, at the end of your list of combinations consider creating combinations where one partner matches and the other does not.
- Avoid ranking programs where one person would be unhappy. Would you rank that program if you were entering the match as an individual?
- Allow plenty of time to enter your ranks into the NRMP's ranking system. Double check and make sure you and your partner's NRMP rank lists are accurate.

Key Points:

1. Educate yourself about the process early at:
<http://www.nrmp.org/match-process/couples-in-the-match/>
2. Talk with your student advisor about realistic goals for number of applications, interviews, and programs to rank for your specific situation.
3. Communicate clearly with your partner about your goals and priorities.
4. The couples match process is different for every couple, so it is important to figure out how it will work best for you. Remember that despite the stress, this system and process is meant to help you and your partner and the vast majority are successful in this endeavor.

References:

1. National Resident Matching Program, Results and Data: 2020 Main Residency Match. National Resident Matching Program, Washington, DC. 2020.
2. Couples in the Match. National Resident Matching Program. Washington, DC. 2018. (Accessed October 24, 2018 at <http://www.nrmp.org/match-process/couples-in-the-match/>)
3. "Surviving the Couples Match" Couples Match Guide. University of Kansas School of Medicine Office of Student Affairs. (Accessed October 1, 2018 at <http://www.kumc.edu/school-of-medicine/osa/residency-information/couples-match.html>)
4. National Resident Matching Program, Data Release and Research Committee: Results of the 2018 NRMP Program Director Survey. National Resident Matching Program, Washington, DC, June 2018. (Accessed October 1st, 2018 at <https://www.nrmp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/NRMP-2018-Program-Director-Survey-for-WWW.pdf>)
5. Council of Emergency Medicine Residency Directors Advising Students Committee in Emergency Medicine. (2018). [CORD ASC-EM Advising Addenda Study]. Unpublished raw data.