



Help prevent medical test mistakes

Medical tests and laboratory tests are important aids for doctors. However, sometimes the wrong test is ordered. Or the test results can be misunderstood. Or your doctor gets the results too late to give you the best treatment. Some tests can have side effects that can hurt you. This brochure includes questions and answers to help you prepare for your test.

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For more information

Speak Up: Help Prevent Errors in Your Care—Laboratory Services, http://www.jointcommission.org/PatientSafety/SpeakUp/gp_speakup_bro.htm

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www.radiologyinfo.org

What if you don't understand the medical forms you're asked to sign?

Ask staff to explain the forms. Don't sign anything until you understand what you are signing. Also, keep your eyeglasses with you so you can read forms, labels and other information.

How do you know that the test results are yours?

Staff should ask for your full name and another piece of information, such as your birth date. If they don't, speak up. Ask to see the labels on the containers that your samples are put in. The label should have your full name and another piece of personal information. Also, make sure that the containers are immediately sealed to prevent mislabeling and contamination.

What if you don't understand what is being done and why?

Ask the health care worker to stop the test and explain what he or she is doing.

How can you be sure that the test you get is the one ordered by your doctor?

Get a copy of the test order from your doctor and take it to the test. Also, if you think you are about to get the wrong test, don't be afraid to tell staff.

You're supposed to get a "contrast agent." What is this?

A "contrast agent" is a liquid that makes organs and blood vessels more visible on X-rays and other tests. If you get a contrast agent and begin itching or have trouble breathing, tell the health care worker. If you are pregnant or nursing, ask your doctor and the health care worker if there is anything that should be done before or after the test to protect you and your baby.

What is a "MRI" and how do you prepare for it?

MRI stands for magnetic resonance imaging. The MRI machine has magnets inside it that are used to take a picture of your body. These strong magnets can quickly pull metal objects into the MRI machine, which can cause injuries. The machine also can heat up metal objects causing burns. If you get a MRI, be sure to remove all metal from your body-such as hairpins-and tell the health care worker if you have any implants in your body.

Your test results show something is wrong. What should you do?

Talk with your doctor and with one or more specialists to decide what the best treatment is for you. You'll be able to make the best decision when you have more information.

What should you do if you have a bad experience at the laboratory or test facility?

If the lab or facility is part of a hospital, call them so that they can correct the problem. You can also file a complaint with the accrediting organization (like the Joint Commission) or licensing authority. The Joint Commission provides a complaint form on its website at www.jointcommission.org.

Don't assume that no news is good news.

Always ask how and when you should get your test results. Follow-up with the doctor who ordered the test. Talking with your doctor and other health care workers can be important in getting the treatment you need as soon as possible.

Questions to ask your doctor

- Why is this test being done? What should it tell you about my health?
- Can I get a copy of my test order to take to the place where the test is being done?
- Are there any foods or drinks I should avoid before or after the test? For how long before or after the test should I avoid the food or drink?
- Should I take my medicine before the test?
- Is there anything else I need to do to prepare for the test?

- Are there any side effects of the test? Will it be painful or uncomfortable? Is it unusual to have pain or discomfort?
- Can I call or visit the laboratory or test facility before I go to take the test?

Questions to ask the health care workers who give the test or take your blood

- Is this facility accredited? Is it inspected by a government agency? When was the last inspection? What was the result?
- Have you washed your hands?
- Do you need to wear gloves while you take my blood or sample?
- When will the results be ready? How will my doctor and I be informed of the results?
- Will you quickly notify me if the test shows a problem that needs immediate action? Will you notify my doctor, too?
- Can you give me a telephone number to call if I have questions?