



Pathology

The Facts

What should I know about pathology test results?

Pathology test results influence about 70% of healthcare decisions and patients have the right to know what tests have been requested, and to have their results explained to them. Here is a snapshot of different elements of the pathology test results process, including some points to consider.

Did you know?

A 'normal' pathology test result for one person might be an 'abnormal' result for another. Resources to explore this concept further include a series of brochures produced by the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA) (www.rcpa.edu.au/Publications/Educational/dayinlife.html) and Lab Tests Online (www.labtestsonline.org.au).

Interpreting pathology test results

The treating practitioner is the most appropriate and qualified person to explain and discuss pathology test results. This is because tests represent just one of the many factors that are considered in reaching a diagnosis and planning treatment. Other factors may include:

- age and gender
- current condition and physical findings
- medical, family and social history
- medications
- other diagnostic procedures
- occupation
- ethnicity
- diet.

Can I talk directly to a pathologist about my pathology test results?

While there is no formal restriction on directly contacting a pathologist, the most appropriate person to discuss pathology test results is the treating practitioner. This is because pathology test results must be interpreted in the context of other factors which may not be known to

the pathologist, such as complete information to interpret the test result including history and physical examination.

Can I have a copy of my pathology test results?

Yes. Patients are legally entitled to a copy of their pathology test results although the treating practitioner is in the best position to understand and interpret the test results and its potential impact for their patient. If patients would like a copy of their test results, they should be requested from the treating practitioner at the time of consultation, or directly from the relevant pathology laboratory.

Each pathology laboratory will have their own protocol on how to release pathology test results to patients, and they may inform the treating practitioner of this request. This is because reading their own pathology test results may be distressing or potentially confusing for some people. Pathology test results are also reported using technical medical language and may be difficult for most patients to interpret or understand.





Did you know?

Even when arrangements have been made for patients to receive a written copy of their pathology test results, the laboratory will not release them verbally over the phone due to the difficulty of positively identifying the caller.

Useful resources on health information can also be found through the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (www.privacy.gov.au).

Did you know?

While patients have a right to request a copy of their results, medical records (including pathology test results) are the property of the treating practitioner. Accessing medical records could require formal requests for access to information via mechanisms such as Freedom of Information Requests (only for public patient records), or in accordance with Privacy Principles such as those published by the RCPA. (<http://www.rcpa.edu.au/Publications/PolicyManualPublic/Guidelines.htm> and click on Privacy Principles).

Who else can access my pathology test results?

Pathology laboratories are bound by privacy laws regarding the use and release of personal information. This means pathology test results can only be released to health practitioners directly involved in the person's care. Other potentially interested parties, including family members, cannot access pathology test results without the consent of the person who had the pathology test.

There are circumstances where pathology laboratories are required to release pathology test results to a third party such as:

- when they are ordered by a court to do so

- when they are required by law to send results of newly diagnosed cancers to Cancer Registries in each State or Territory, or report notifiable diseases, such as measles, to the relevant health authority.

How long will it take to get my pathology test results?

Pathology test 'turnaround times' depend on the circumstances and type of pathology test requested. For example, an urgent blood test result may only take minutes to generate. The same test for a non-urgent case may be processed on the next routine run of that particular test, or even the next day. Other pathology tests might take days to complete, such as growing bacteria on a culture plate, or weeks to months if they are sent to a specialist reference laboratory or overseas.

How are pathology test results delivered?

Most pathology test results are transmitted electronically, although some are still delivered to treating practitioners by phone, fax or paper. Treating practitioners can download results from secure Internet sites or access results online using a unique password and login.

Can I get a second opinion?

Yes. While patients cannot directly request a second opinion from the pathology laboratory, they can ask their treating practitioner to arrange one. This may involve collecting another sample, or a second pathology laboratory may be able to process the same sample.





Can I have my pathology specimen back?

Yes. Although the original pathology specimen belongs to the person who had the test, it becomes the property of the pathology laboratory once it has been processed or analysed.

Pathology laboratories must retain all specimens for a mandatory time specified by law, which varies according to the type of specimen or pathology test, and can be anything from a few days to 20 years. After this time the specimen is destroyed for reasons of privacy, and to avoid

infection risks, unless the patient has requested its return. The pathology laboratory may charge a fee to return the specimen because it requires special handling and processing procedures.

Point of Care Testing (PoCT)

Point of Care Testing occurs when pathology tests are performed on a testing device at the actual point of care, with results used immediately for patient care. It is particularly suited for critically ill patients in intensive care and emergency units, and in rural and remote communities where pathology laboratory access may be restricted by factors such as geographical distance. For example, PoCT enables pathology test results to be available before a person leaves the treating practitioner's room to travel home - which can be hundreds of kilometres away.

Did you know?

Point of Care tests are often more expensive than the same pathology test sent to a pathology laboratory for analysis, and the costs are not usually subsidised by Medicare.

Did you know?

Patients can contact their referring practitioner or the pathology laboratory to get an indication of when their pathology test results will be available.

Did you know?

Second opinions may be helpful for a complex diagnosis, or for a significant diagnosis that has serious consequences for the person or their family.

Reliable information on pathology can be found at:

The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA) - www.rcpa.edu.au
ePathWay (the RCPA's online magazine for consumers) - <http://epathway.rcpa.edu.au>
The RCPA Manual - <http://rcpamannual.edu.au>
The Pathology Associations Council (PAC) - www.pathology.med.pro
Lab Tests Online - www.labtestsonline.org.au

