

What You Need to Know About Lab Tests

Why do I need lab tests?

Before being diagnosed with HIV, you probably didn't need your blood tested on a regular basis. With HIV, regular blood testing is important to help you stay healthy. The tests help you and your doctor:

- decide when to start HIV drugs and treatment for other infections;
- tell if an HIV drug will work for you, or has stopped working if you're taking it;
- confirm whether treatment is causing certain side effects;
- watch for other health problems, including ones not caused by HIV.

What is the complete blood count?

One of the most important blood tests that you'll need on a regular basis is the complete blood count (CBC). This looks at the three major types of cells in your blood: red blood cells, white blood cells and platelets. HIV, some meds and other infections can cause changes in your CBC, leading to anemia or other blood disorders.

What is the CD4 count?

CD4s, a group of white blood cells, help defend the body against certain infections and cancers. HIV attacks and kills these cells. Therefore, keeping track of the number of CD4s in a blood sample helps determine the health of your immune system. A "normal" CD4 count is between 500 and 1500 cells per cubic millimeter of blood; if CD4s fall below 350 in people with HIV, treatment is often recommended. Keeping CD4s high—and your immune system healthy—is the goal of HIV drug treatment.

Are there other tests specific to HIV?

Yes. These include:

- **Viral load:** This test measures the amount of HIV in your blood. When used in combination with your CD4 count, viral load is extremely useful in determining when to begin or change HIV treatment.
- **Drug-resistance (DR) testing:** While viral load can help show if drug treatment is no longer working effectively, DR testing can explain why. Some DR tests are also recommended before you start treatment in the first place.

What is the blood chemistry test?

Also known as a chem screen, this test measures amounts of important chemicals in the blood. You and your doc can use this to watch the health of major organs in the body, such as the liver and kidneys, that can be affected by HIV, other infections or medications. A problem with a specific organ may arise due to a personal or family history of illness or the use of certain HIV meds. In that case, more detailed lab tests may be recommended, including closer examinations of your heart, liver and kidney health.

QUICK TIPS

To get the most out of your blood tests:

■ TEST REGULARLY

Basic labs, including CD4 count, viral load, CBC and the chem screen, should be checked every three to six months if you're positive.

■ WATCH FOR TRENDS

Does your CD4 count seem low? Is there a sudden rise in your viral load? Don't let one-time results get you down. Retesting and watching for trends over time are essential to make sense of lab results.

■ TEST BEFORE BREAKFAST

Have blood drawn first thing in the morning, before you eat. Foods and drinks can skew some lab tests, including your glucose, triglyceride and cholesterol levels.

■ TELL ALL

Feeling unwell? Missing doses? Be sure to tell your doc. Lab results may not mean much without personal info from you.

■ AM I NORMAL?

Every lab result comes with a "reference range," the minimum and maximum of each substance a person needs to stay healthy. However, the "normal" range for some can vary according to age, gender and ethnicity. It can also differ from lab to lab. Talk to your doctor.

■ LEARN MORE

Ask your doctor for a copy of your lab report. Also ask about what the tests are, why they're important and what you can do to keep your numbers good—and your body healthy.

For more lab test tips,
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