

Your Lab Tests

When you have cancer it seems that someone is always taking blood for some kind of test. Lab tests are done to watch your response to treatment. Lab tests also find problems and help to prevent many side effects. Here are some of the most common types of blood tests and what they can tell your doctor about your health.



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CBC: The most common lab test that you will have done is called a complete blood count (CBC). Blood is made up of water, proteins, nutrients, and living cells. A CBC tells your doctor about your blood cells. It measures 3 types of cells that are in the blood: red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets. Each of these types of cells has a special job. Any of these cells can be changed by cancer treatment.

Red blood cells (RBCs) are needed to carry oxygen to all the parts of your body. The simplest way to measure red blood cells is to measure the hemoglobin (HGB) or the hematocrit (HCT). When either of these gets too low, the person is said to be anemic (ah-nee-mick). A normal HGB is 12 to 18, and a normal HCT is 37 to 52.

Platelets (plate-lets) help stop bleeding. A healthy person has between 150,000 and 450,000 platelets. You may bruise or bleed easily when your platelet levels are low. The chance of bleeding goes up when the number of platelets drops below 20,000.

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White blood cells (WBCs) fight infection. A healthy person has between 5,000 and 10,000 WBCs. There are many types of white blood cells, and each works in a special way. The most important white blood cell for fighting infection is the neutrophil (new-tro-fil). A healthy person has between 2,500 and 6,000 neutrophils. Your doctor will watch your counts closely because the chance of infection is much higher when the neutrophil count is below 500.

Chemistry panel: This blood test can tell your doctor a lot about how well your organs are working. For instance, one part of this test tells your doctor how well your liver is working. Other parts look at how well your kidneys, heart, and lungs are working.

What is normal?

Each lab has its own range for what it says is normal for complete blood counts and blood chemistry results. As a rule, the normal ranges are written on the lab report, next to your test results. Some people find it helpful to ask for a copy of their test results and have a member of their health care team go over the numbers with them.

For more information, please visit www.cancer.org.

