Your Lab Tests

When you have cancer, it may feel like someone is always taking blood from you for some kind of test. These lab tests are done to watch how your body responds to treatment. Lab tests can also be used to find problems and help prevent side effects. Here are the most common types of lab tests and what they can tell your doctor about your health.

Blood count

The most common lab test you’ll have done is called a complete blood count, or CBC. Blood is made up of water, proteins, nutrients, and living cells. A CBC measures 3 types of cells in the blood: red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets.

Each of these cell types has a special job. Any of these cells can be changed by cancer treatment.

- **Red blood cells (RBCs)** carry oxygen through your whole 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, a person is said to be anemic. This can cause fatigue and can make you feel very tired or weak.

- **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. A healthy person has between 2,500 and 6,000 neutrophils. Your chance of infection is much higher when the neutrophil count is below 500.

- **Platelets (plts)** 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.

Chemistry panel

A chemistry panel is a blood test that can tell your doctor a lot about how well your organs are working. For instance, results of one part of this test show how well your liver is working. Other results show how well your kidneys, heart, and lungs are working. It also measures the electrolytes in your blood, such as sodium and calcium.
What’s normal?

The normal range for complete blood counts and blood chemistry results can be a little bit different from lab to lab. 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.

If you have questions about your cancer or your lab tests, please call the American Cancer Society at 1-800-227-2345. We’re here when you need us – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

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