Ask Before You Trust Any Test

Five questions to ask before you pay for a lab test or act on a result: how it was checked, how repeatable it is, and what happens when the answer is borderline.

THREE WORDS THAT DESCRIBE A TEST

Term	What it asks	What it means for you
Sensitivity	How often does the test catch the real thing?	A test with low sensitivity can miss people who have it.
Specificity	How often does it correctly say no?	A test with low specificity can flag people who do not have it.
Repeatability	Would it give the same answer twice?	Labs measure this with the coefficient of variation.

A GOOD TEST CAN STILL BE THE WRONG TEST

A test can be accurate and still not answer your question. Before ordering, ask what the result would change, and whether a repeat is planned if the answer is close to the line.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- [ ] What are the sensitivity and specificity, and how were they measured?
- [ ] Was it checked on real patient samples, not lab-made ones?
- [ ] How many samples were used to check it?
- [ ] Was it tested against look-alike conditions that could confuse it?
- [ ] What happens when a result is borderline, and what should I do next?

Sources: A lab validation request template, 2022. It was written for COVID-era tests; the questions here are general. Our own wording.

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