

Testing for Influenza

Why won't my doctor test me for influenza (the flu)?

If you have symptoms, and your doctor thinks it's the flu, most likely it is the flu and he is going to treat you the same regardless of the influenza test result. An influenza test result (either positive or negative) will not likely change the treatment your doctor prescribes for you, nor will it change the steps you should take to get well. In short, your treatment is based on your doctor's diagnosis and not the influenza test result.

Symptoms of influenza include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Muscle aches and pains
- Headache
- Stuffy or runny nose
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Weakness

If you fit into a high risk group for influenza-related complications, or your symptoms are severe, your healthcare provider will know if you need to be tested for influenza.

Those at high risk for influenza-related complications include:

- Children under the age of 5 years (especially children younger than 2 years of age).
- Adults 65 years of age and older.
- Pregnant women.
- People who have medical conditions including:
 - Asthma
 - Neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions.
 - Chronic lung disease, including COPD.
 - Blood disorders.
 - Endocrine disorders (such as diabetes).
 - Kidney, liver and metabolic disorders.
 - Weakened immune systems due to disease or medication.
 - People under 19 years of age who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy.

Limitations of Rapid Influenza Tests

To test a patient initially for the flu, many healthcare clinics use what is known as a rapid influenza test. Rapid influenza tests that are in use have been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Rapid influenza tests are useful because the results are available before the patient even leaves the doctor's office. However, rapid influenza test results are not always 100% accurate.

When a rapid influenza test comes back as "positive for influenza", there is a possibility that the patient does not actually have influenza despite the positive test result. This is called a "false positive" result. Additionally, a rapid influenza test may come back as "negative for influenza" when the patient might in fact have influenza. This is called a "false-negative" result. Because rapid influenza tests are not always accurate, a doctor's clinical judgment is often just as, if not more, valuable and accurate than a rapid influenza test result.