Waiting for test results

It can be difficult waiting for test results. Be assured that your medical team are gathering important information during this time.

On this page

How long will I need to wait?

Why do I need to wait?

Coping with waiting

Support

How long do I need to wait for my test results?

The time you wait for your test results can vary greatly.

Sometimes, results are available very quickly, within a couple of days. This is usually if the results are clear and the tests have been analysed urgently. The waiting time also depends on the type of test you had. **Blood test** results are usually available quickly. It takes longer for samples to be prepared and experts to be available to look at other tests like **biopsy** samples and scans.
In most cases, it takes a couple of weeks to get test results. It can take longer to get the results of tests that are not urgent, for example, tests that are part of your routine follow-up. More specialist tests can also take longer. For example, if the samples need to be sent to another laboratory or expert.

Do not be alarmed if it takes longer than usual to get the results of tests. It does not mean something is wrong – there are many possible reasons for a delay.

You might be given an initial diagnosis then have more tests to find out more about the lymphoma. This helps your medical team recommend the best treatment for you.

Your medical team should be able to give you an idea of how long your test results will take. Talk to them if you are unsure or if your results are taking longer than you expected.

Why do I need to wait for my test results?

The wait for test results might seem long. However, there is a lot going on between the time you have your test and the time you get the results. The person doing the test is not usually trained to interpret the information they collect. The information is passed on to a specialist.

- If you had an X-ray or a scan, a radiologist examines the images.
- Blood samples are tested in a laboratory.
- The samples, for example, from a biopsy, bone marrow tests or lumbar puncture, are prepared in a specialised laboratory and examined by expert pathologists. The samples may need to be sent from your local hospital to the specialised laboratory.

Some samples take longer to prepare than others; for example, the tissue in bone marrow tests has to be decalcified (calcium removed) before the sample can be examined.

The specialists write a report about your test results. Reports are sent to the doctor who ordered the test, usually your consultant. In most cases, your
Your doctor waits until they have reviewed the information from all of your tests before they contact you. Your doctor does not want to risk giving you an incorrect diagnosis or treatment that is not suitable for you. Several different people with different specialities need to look at your tests and discuss your results. This group of people is known as a ‘multidisciplinary team’ (MDT). If you have a rare type of lymphoma, there might be more people involved in making sure you have the correct diagnosis and the best care.

When all the information is available, your doctor arranges an appointment with you to discuss the results of the tests.

There are many possible reasons for test results to take longer than expected, for example:

- More specialised tests might be needed on samples. For example, cells from a biopsy are looked at under a microscope using different stains (dyes). This is usually enough to make a diagnosis but other tests might be needed to look at the cells in more detail.
- Samples may need to be sent away to a different laboratory if specialised tests are needed, for example to look at the proteins in a tissue sample.
- The specialist might need a second opinion. Samples and images might need to be sent to an expert at another hospital, particularly for rare types of lymphoma.
- The results of one test might mean that your doctor recommends further tests. For example, if a scan identifies a possible problem, you might need a biopsy or a different type of scan to look at an area in more detail.
- A test might need to be repeated, for example, if there were not enough cells in the sample collected.

It is very important that your medical team know exactly what type of lymphoma you have and how it is affecting you. This information helps them plan the best treatment for you.

A delay of a couple of weeks while waiting for test results is very unlikely to affect your outcome. Your doctor can request that your test results are prioritised if they are needed urgently.
How can I cope emotionally while waiting for test results?

Waiting for test results can bring a great deal of uncertainty and give rise to some difficult emotional responses. You might start to imagine the worst possible scenario or have a general sense of anxiety or fear.

While these emotions are natural and may not go away entirely, there are some simple things you could do to help manage them.

Write down your worries

Often, worries go round in our head, which can be exhausting. Try to ‘catch’ these thoughts before they spiral out of control. Simply getting your thoughts down on paper can take away some of their power and bring a sense of release. Seeing your worries in writing may also help you to identify any links between them and help you to consider how to address them.

If you find that worries start to take over your thoughts, try setting aside ‘worry time’ – contained time to think about your worries. Write down any worries or concerns as they come into your mind. Keep a notepad by your bed in case they come into your mind during the night. Tell yourself that you will return to your worries and give them your full attention later.

Identify strategies

Try to pin-point what underlies your worry and then think about how you can help yourself.

For example:

Worry

- ‘If I’m given a diagnosis of lymphoma, I won’t know how to deal with it. I know nothing about lymphoma or what it could mean for me.’
Strategies

- Reconsider unhelpful thoughts, for example: ‘I don’t have a diagnosis now so I will take one day at a time. If I am diagnosed with lymphoma, I will have an opportunity to ask questions and to find out my options’.

Useful resources

- Medical professionals who give you your test results can answer your questions and give you more information about lymphoma and your treatment options.
- Lymphoma Action offers information about lymphoma and emotional support to people affected by lymphoma.

Worry

- ‘I feel totally overwhelmed. I can’t deal with the uncertainty’.

Strategies

- Make time for yourself (for example, take a walk, spend time with friends or have a relaxing bath).
- Try stress relieving techniques (breathing exercises, meditation or mindfulness).
- Talk to someone close to you about how you feel.
- Focus your energies on something creative, for example paint or sing.

Useful resources

- Your doctors can discuss your anxieties with you. They may also be able to refer you for specialist psychological support with your emotions.
- Lymphoma Action’s support services. For example, you may find it helps to talk to others who can relate to your situation through online forums and support groups.
Where can I find support?

Going for tests and scans for lymphoma will have an emotional impact. However, if your level of distress continues or worsens and affects your everyday life, you may find it beneficial to seek additional support.

This could include a talking therapy, such as counselling or another type of psychological support. Ask your doctor if they can refer you on the NHS, or search for a private practitioner online. You can search for a private therapist in your area on the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy website. You can also use the British Psychological Society’s search tool.

I found that waiting for test results and fearing the unknown made for a stressful time. Remember that you are not alone. Online forums can be a great source of support to read or ‘chat’ about experiences.

— Andrea diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma

Everyone finds their own way, so do what’s right for you. I found that positive distractions really helped me. I listened to music, went out with friends,
Remember that your medical team is there to support you. This includes listening to any concerns you have, answering your questions and suggesting ways to help you.

You can find self-help strategies and support with coping with challenging feelings online through various websites, including the Mental Health Foundation, Mind, and Moodjuice.

You may also find our Living with lymphoma booklet helpful. It describes some of the feelings and emotions you may have if you have been diagnosed with lymphoma and suggests ways to help you manage these.

Find out more about how the Lymphoma Action can support you.

References

These are some of the sources we used to prepare this information. The full list of sources is available on request. Please contact us by email at publications@lymphoma-action.org.uk or phone on 01296 619409 if you would like a copy.


baked, read or tried something new – anything to keep my mind occupied. I would suggest using the internet with caution. Don’t let it fuel your anxieties.

— Andrea, diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma


Further reading

- The emotional impact of living with lymphoma
- Your feelings after a diagnosis of lymphoma
- Managing stress
- Question to ask your medical team
- Glossary
Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank the Expert Reviewers and members of our Reader Panel who gave their time to review this information.

Content last reviewed: November 2017
Updated: April 2018
Next planned review: November 2020

© Lymphoma Action

Tell us what you think and help us to improve our resources for people affected by lymphoma. If you have any feedback, please visit www.lymphoma-action.org.uk/feedback or email publications@lymphoma-action.org.uk.

All our information is available without charge. If you have found it useful and would like to make a donation to support our work you can do so on our website www.lymphoma-action.org.uk/donate. Our information could not be produced without support from people like you. Thank you.

Disclaimer

We make every effort to make sure that the information we provide is accurate at time of publication, but medical research is constantly changing. Our information is not a substitute for individual medical advice from a trained clinician. If you are concerned about your health, consult your doctor.

Lymphoma Action cannot accept liability for any loss or damage resulting from any inaccuracy in this information or third party information we refer to, including that on third party websites.

The following user-generated information is excluded from our Information Standard certification: web blogs, chatrooms, forums, personal experience pages, social media, fundraising materials and Lymphoma Matters magazine. Neither the Information Standard scheme operator nor the scheme owner shall have any responsibility whatsoever for costs, losses or direct or indirect damages or costs arising from inaccuracy of information or omissions in the information published on the website on behalf of Lymphoma Action.