

Waiting for test results

Many people feel anxious while waiting for test results. Below, we outline what is happening during this time, and give suggestions to help you cope with the wait.

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We have separate information about the topics in **bold font**. Please get in touch if you'd like to request copies or if you would like further information about any aspect of lymphoma. Phone 0808 808 5555 or email information@lymphoma-action.org.uk.

How long do test results take?

Your medical team should be able to give you an idea of when to expect your test results.

In most cases, it takes a couple of weeks to get test results. It can take longer to get the results of non-urgent tests, for example, those that are part of your routine **follow-up**.

Waiting times also depend on the **type of test** you had. For example:

- Most **blood test** results are available within a few days; some are available on the same day. Occasionally, specialist blood tests can take a few weeks.
- Results of tests where the sample needs to be prepared in a particular way, for example a **biopsy**, take a bit longer – usually a few weeks.
- Some tests use specialised equipment or need specially trained scientists to find out the exact genetic make-up of lymphoma cells. The samples might need to be sent to a different laboratory and can take several weeks.

Results of biopsies and scans take a bit of time. They need to be looked at by a specialist so that your medical team are clear on the diagnosis and can plan the best treatment for you.

Lucy Whiteman, Lymphoma Clinical Nurse Specialist

Don't be alarmed if it takes longer than expected to get the results back; there are many **possible reasons for a delay**. Talk to a member of your medical team if you are waiting for longer than you expected. They can give you information about why this might be the case and when you are likely to find out more.

If the results take a long time, it doesn't mean that it's bad news; it just means that we need more information and more time to look at some results. You might need further tests so that your medical team can find out more about the type of lymphoma you have.

Lucy Whiteman, Lymphoma Clinical Nurse Specialist

You might be given an initial diagnosis while you are still waiting to have further tests to find out more about the lymphoma, for example an extra scan or occasionally another biopsy. These further tests help your medical team recommend the most appropriate **treatment** for you.

Sometimes a test might give an unclear result, or the sample might have been too small to run the test accurately. If this happens, you might have to repeat the test, or have a slightly different test.

Frequently asked questions

We answer some of the questions people often ask about waiting for test results. Speak to your GP or a member of your medical team if you have questions or concerns about your specific situation.

What are the specialists doing while I am waiting?

The person collecting blood and tissue samples or taking images for your tests and scans is not usually trained to understand the information they collect. The test sample or image needs to be given to a specialist.

Different health professionals with different specialities look at your tests and scans and discuss your results. This group of people is known as a **multidisciplinary team** (MDT). If your **lymphoma type** is rare, there might be more people involved, to help make sure you get the correct diagnosis and the most appropriate care.

- Blood samples are tested in a laboratory by biochemical scientists.
- Scan images (including **X-rays**) are examined by a radiologist.
- Samples from a biopsy, **bone marrow biopsy** and **lumbar puncture** are prepared in a specialised laboratory and examined by a pathologist. The laboratory might be at a different location from your local hospital.

How long does it take to prepare a sample for testing?

Some samples take longer to prepare than others. For example, the tissue in a **bone marrow biopsy** has to have the calcium removed (decalcified) before the sample can be examined. The tissue from a lymph node biopsy has to be preserved, cut into very thin slices and stained with chemicals to help make the cells show up better under a microscope.

Who will contact me, and when?

The specialists write a report about your test results. This is sent to the doctor who asked for the test to be done, usually your consultant. In most cases, your doctor waits until they have reviewed the information from all of your tests before they contact you. This is to make sure you get the correct diagnosis and the most suitable **treatment**. Once they have all the information that is available, you will have a face-to-face appointment with you to discuss the results of the tests. You can ask to take a family member or friend with you if you would like to.

Why might my results take longer than expected?

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

- The specialist looking at the test results might need a second opinion. This can mean sending the samples and scan images to an expert at another hospital, particularly if you have a rare type of lymphoma.
- The samples might need to be sent to a different laboratory for specialist tests, for example to look at the genes in lymphoma cells.

- A test might need to be repeated, for example, if there were not enough cells collected in the first sample or if the results of the first test were unclear.

If the test results take longer than expected, any follow-up appointments already scheduled might be re-arranged for when the final results will be available. Alternatively, your doctor might still want to see you while waiting for the results so that they can monitor your symptoms.

If any of your symptoms worsen while you're waiting to hear test results, contact a member of your medical team or your GP.

Will a delay in getting test results affect my outcome?

A delay of a couple of weeks is very unlikely to affect your outcome. Your doctor can request that your test results are prioritised.

Coping with waiting

Waiting for test results can be difficult. Many people find the uncertainty of it very challenging to deal with. You might feel scared or anxious. Some people start to imagine the worst possible scenario.

We hear from many people who are understandably very anxious whilst waiting for test results. People often refer to the 'unknown' and how scary this can feel. We're here to offer a listening ear at any time.

Sharon, Lymphoma Action helpline services team

While these emotions are natural and might not go away completely, there are some strategies you could try to help manage them.

Address your worries

It can be exhausting when worries go around in your head. Try to 'catch' worries early, before they take over your thoughts.

Write your worries down

Simply writing your thoughts down can take away some of their power and bring a sense of freedom. Seeing your worries in writing might also help you to notice any links between them so you can then think about how to address them.

- Write down any worries or concerns as they come into your mind. Doing this might free up your mind to allow you to focus on something else.
- If your worries start to take over your thoughts, try to set aside 'worry time'. You could think of this as a container or box for your worries.
- Keep a notepad by your bed to write down any worries that come to you during the night. Make an agreement with yourself that you'll return to them the next day when you can give them your full attention during your 'worry time'.

Reconsider worries

Try to break down your worries to help you understand what underlies them. You can then think about what you could do to help yourself. For example:

- **Worry:** 'The doctors will tell me I've got lymphoma. I don't know anything about it and won't know what's going on'.
- **Reconsidered thought:** 'I don't have a diagnosis now so will take one day at a time. If I am diagnosed with lymphoma, I'll have opportunities to **ask my medical team questions** so that I can find out what this means and can discuss my treatment options. Lymphoma Action has **information about lymphoma** and offers **emotional support** to people affected by lymphoma.

Talk to someone about how you feel

Many people find that talking about how they feel to helps them to process difficult emotions. You might choose to speak to someone you're close to or you could get in touch with our **helpline team**. Let a member of your **medical team** know how you feel too – a clinical nurse specialist is often a good first point of contact.

You might prefer to talk to a professional who is trained in a **talking therapy** such as a **counselling**; you could speak to your GP about the possibility of a referral on the NHS. If you are in a position to pay for a private practitioner, you can search online for one in your area. The **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy** and the **British Psychological Society** both have search tools to help you find a therapist.

Make time for yourself

Anxiety can be mentally draining. It's important to make time for yourself and to do things that are enjoyable and relaxing. This could include:

- social activities with people you care about
- **stress-relieving techniques**, such as **breathing exercises** or meditation techniques, such as **mindfulness**
- **physical activity and exercise**, which can boost mood
- doing something creative, such as painting, drawing, model-making or singing.

Spend time in nature

Many people find that nature helps them feel calmer. This could be, for example, walking or doing other activities outside. Some people find that just looking at plants, animals or natural landscapes through a window or on television helps. Feeling a connection with the natural world can help us to feel more 'grounded' and peaceful.

Sometimes I just needed something to take my mind off things. If I felt too tired to go for a walk, spending time in the garden always helped. Even sitting by the window and watching the birds made me feel better.

Corrin, diagnosed with diffuse large B-cell lymphoma

MIND, a mental health charity, has information about **nature and mental wellbeing**, including some ideas to try.

Listen to yourself

Although we've given some suggestions of things you might like to try, emotional wellbeing is very personal. Trust yourself to know what helps you.

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, 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

References

The full list of references for this page is available on our website. Alternatively, email publications@lymphoma-action.org.uk or call 01296 619409 if you would like a copy.

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✓	Evidence-based
✓	Approved by experts
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