

INFORMATION ABOUT STREP TESTING

“Strep Throat” is an infection caused by a bacteria called Group A Streptococcus (A discussion of this illness may be found in our handout “Strep Throat Infection”). It is important to distinguish strep throat from throat infections caused by viruses because strep can be treated with antibiotics; viral throat infections can not.

There are two types of tests available to diagnose strep infection. The “gold standard” test is a throat culture where strep germs are grown in the laboratory. This is considered the most accurate type of test available, but its disadvantage is the time delay between submitting the sample and obtaining the result (usually 48 – 72 hours). Previously, doctors performed these tests in their offices, so results were available in 24 – 48 hours, but federal law now prohibits this and only a “reference lab” may perform the test

The second method available to diagnose strep infection is a rapid strep test. There are many different types of rapid tests available. Factors influencing doctors’ choice of test include the accuracy of the test and insurance company mandates. In addition, there are regulations stating which tests may be performed in doctors’ offices.

Positive rapid strep tests are very reliable and do not require confirmation with a throat culture. However, most negative rapid strep tests require a throat culture for confirmation. The throat culture is positive in about 10% of samples submitted after a negative rapid test; therefore we feel that a throat culture is required to be sure the patient does not have strep.

Patients whose insurance covers lab fees are not billed for the tests. Patients without lab coverage will be charged by HPA for the rapid test and by the lab for the throat culture.

Options for testing include:

- Defer the rapid test and await the culture result to diagnose strep.
- Perform the rapid test. If positive, no further testing is required. If negative, a throat culture will be sent.

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