

GP Online Services Guidance

Introducing online access to test results to patients

It may help to explain to patients who have Patient Online access to their detailed coded record (DCR) that the meaning of laboratory results can be difficult to interpret and that the practice is happy to explain the results to them.

It is good practice, when samples are being taken for laboratory tests, to explain the tests are being taken, what the results may indicate and what the patient should do when they see the results online; whether to make an appointment (for a face-to-face, telephone or online consultation) to discuss the actions to take in light of the results.

Topics that you may like to discuss with patients who have Patient Online record access include:

- It is also helpful to check if patients use online record access when carrying out tests. As well as explaining the purpose of tests before they are taken, it helps to explain the possible results and what the patient should do if they are concerned when they see them online.
- It is helpful if patients check their results within a certain timeframe from the time of the test (eg your result will be available within the next week). Nevertheless, practices have a duty of care and should have a **safety back up plan** for communication of urgent results that require action, for example, the practice policy may still be to ring patients with significant abnormal results.
- Sometimes patients are advised to **take actions on new test results** by checking them online and following a recommended course of action. This may be backed up by a patient information note or leaflet. It is important to remember that it remains the responsibility of the practice to ensure that the patient is informed of a result if action should be taken.
- The interpretation of **abnormal results** can be particularly difficult. Not all test results marked outside the normal range are clinically significant but an uninformed patient may not be able to assess the meaning of an abnormal result without help, and may be unnecessarily distressed by something they see in their record. It is up to the practice to avoid this whenever possible. There is a template for a patient information leaflet on this in the Toolkit. Consider that:
 - reference ranges reported by laboratories may not allow for individual differences in age, gender and ethnicity which can lead to variation in real normal ranges.
 - generally 5% of the healthy population has a test that is outside the reference range.
 - a test result may not be able to distinguish accurately between healthy people and those with disease. A false positive or false negative may be upsetting or inappropriately reassuring for the patient.
 - risk stratification is often based on several factors so for example two people with the same high total cholesterol may be at very different risks of future cardiovascular disease.
- If your GP clinical IT system has the functionality to allow it, it may be helpful to add free text to test results in the test result inbox before they are filed. This allows another health care professional to:

- advise further action e.g., book appointment/repeat blood test
- explain a test result
- reassure a patient about a result outside the reference range.

① Explaining laboratory test results to patients: what the clinician needs to know, British Medical Journal, 2015;351:h5552