

Why does your doctor want your blood tested? Find out!

UNDERSTANDING YOUR DOCTOR'S LABORATORY ORDERS

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DISCLAIMER

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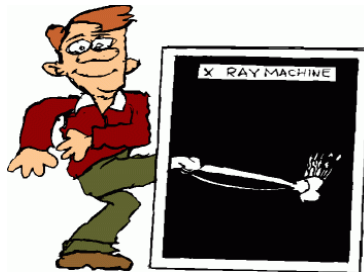
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UNDERSTANDING YOUR DOCTOR'S ORDERS

Opinions are a dime a dozen. Everybody has hundreds of them. People will argue about everything from birth to death. This book is divided into 2 sections. The first section is based on scientific facts. The second will contain my opinions, of which I have hundreds, like everybody else.

Have you ever watched ER on television? Have you listened closely to the “foreign” language of the doctors and nurses? “How's the CBC? Is the PTT normal so we can take him to surgery? Get a CMP, PTINR, and a thromboelastograph.....STAT!!!!” What on earth does all that jargon mean? It is surely impressive, to say the least.

When your doctor orders tests for you, how would you like to understand what he is saying? I am not pretending to be able to explain the significance of every laboratory test. The goal is to decipher the language so that you can understand your doctor's orders enough to understand your diagnosis and treatment, or at least to be able to communicate to your doctor better about your choices of treatments. After all, that's why you go to the doctor, isn't it? You need to understand your treatment options for your health issues. Often a doctor will simply prescribe medication with very little explanation of why you are taking it. He gives the dosage but not the reasons. And worse yet, there is little mention of side effects. Medication can be very valuable to the treatment of conditions and of symptoms. Who enjoys feeling terrible? Medication is not always the answer, but it may offer temporary relief so your body can heal faster and better. Some medications cure illnesses (antibiotics can definitely kill bacteria), and some minimize symptoms which gives the body a better chance to heal itself.

My approach to teaching you the doctor's "language" is to give you a layman's version of my area of expertise, and that is laboratory medicine. We in the laboratory perform a large variety of tests on a large variety of sample types (we won't get into sample types too explicitly to protect those of you with sensitive stomachs!). No one sees us in the lab. We are the mysterious place where specimens are dropped off in one door and results are handed out another. What happens in between? Are a bunch of weird little scientists taking the tubes, boiling them, pouring chemicals into them, and evaluating chemical reactions? Well, in a sense, yes. Except the chemical reactions occur in tiny chambers inside of instruments, and we in the laboratory monitor the instruments, the chemicals, and the results. In our modern society, we in the laboratory also need to be computer experts in order to operate the analyzers and pass the results on to your doctor.

Let me tell you about a typical day in a medical laboratory. Can you imagine having a job in which you get up very early every morning (remember, labs are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week), put on your lab coat, and start analyzing human samples? No one knows who you are, know one in the medical profession even cares, yet they all want their results STAT. "*STAT*" is the first medical term you must know. It means "yesterday". Well, that's when the doctor wants the result, so it is processed ASAP. There is your second medical term, "*ASAP*". That means "as soon as possible", and for STAT samples, ASAP had better be quick!! We in the laboratory actually monitor our "turn around times". No, that is not how many full spins you can do before you fall down!! It is how long it takes between the time a specimen is received in the lab and the time the result is reported to the doctor. If the "turn around time", also known as *TAT*, is poor, then the doctors are angry, the patient is angry, and your boss is angry. However, what they fail to realize is that our analyzer was probably "down" (temporarily not working), we were scrambling to repair it, and one of the lab technologists called in sick!! It is a real, if not surreal, world in the laboratory. We work very hard, and the work never ends. But the truth is, without our information, how would the doctors know what was wrong with their patients and consequently how to treat them?

Let's begin your course on "understanding your doctor".

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