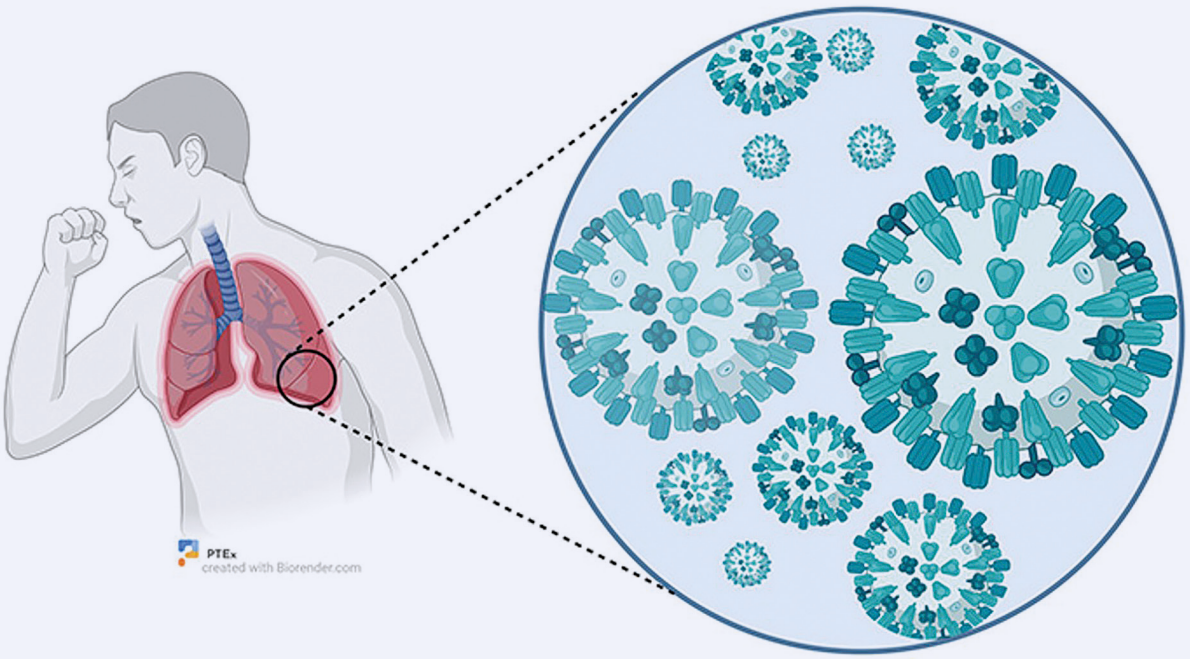
PATHOLOGY TESTS EXPLAINED

Information about pathology tests to help everyone take control of their health and make the right decisions about their care.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT **YOUR FLU TEST**

Flu, or influenza, is often confused with the common cold, but they are caused by different viruses. They can produce similar symptoms, but flu is usually more severe and longer lasting and can lead to serious complications especially in the very young, elderly, people from indigenous communities, those with lowered immune systems, and those who already have a chronic health condition.

The flu test will show which of three possible viruses are present and guide the choice of anti-viral treatment if one is needed. Some laboratories will also test for other similar flu-like viruses such as parainfluenza, RSV and human metapneumovirus as part of the same test.



Influenza

The three types of influenza virus

There are three types of influenza virus known as A, B and C. They regularly change or mutate to create multiple strains or sub-types.

- A is the most common and causes the most severe symptoms.
- B is less common with less severe symptoms,
- C usually causes only a mild illness, similar to the common cold.

Type A viruses are further categorised into subtypes based on two kinds of proteins found on their surface: haemagglutinin (H) and neuraminidase (N). Type A are the only influenza viruses known to cause flu pandemics such as Swine Flu in 2009. Type B viruses are also categorised into two lineages: Yamagata and Victoria – named after the places they were first recorded.

The flu test

The flu test detects the virus' genetic material, known as RNA. It does this on a sample usually taken from the nose or throat. The accuracy of the test depends on having enough virus in the sample. The virus is only shed during the first few days that someone is ill, when there is enough virus to be able to be detected.

Flu is a notifiable condition which means a doctor ordering a test and the laboratory performing the test are responsible for notifying the public health authorities. A flu test can also be ordered to document an outbreak of flu in a local community.

What your results can tell you

If your flu test is positive

The result will guide your doctor in deciding how to treat your illness including the use of anti-viral medications if you are at risk of serious complications. Generally, these medications need to be taken within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms in order to be effective at reducing their severity. For otherwise healthy people, the treatment is usually to stay in bed and rest, drinking plenty of fluids.

A positive test result will also be shared with public health officials so that they can inform others in the community and take measures to limit the potential spread of the disease.

If your flu test is negative

This may mean that you have something other than flu, and more tests may be required. A negative test may also mean there was not sufficient virus in the specimen for it to be detected but this is less likely with newer, more sensitive detection methods. If your infection remains unclear, they may also order other tests or viral studies.

Vaccination

The choice of tests your doctor makes will be based It is recommended that everyone over the age of six months is vaccinated against the flu. The vaccine cannot give you the flu because it contains deactivated virus. Vaccines in Australia are quadrivalent which means they act against four different types of flu. Each year they are redesigned to work against the strains that are circulating in the community.

The level of vaccine protection depends on factors such as the age and health of a person. Vaccine reduces the risk of someone under 65 getting the flu by between 59 per cent and 65 per cent. In older adults the level of protection is lower, so there is a special adjuvanted vaccine for older people which has substances added to create a stronger immune response. A common example of an adjuvant is squalene – a substance found naturally on plants and animals including on your skin.

Questions to ask your doctor

Why does this test need to be done?

Do I need to prepare (such as fast or avoid medications) for the sample collection?

Will an abnormal result mean I need further tests?

How could it change the course of my care?

What will happen next, after the test?

For more detailed information on these and many other tests go to **pathologytestsexplained.org.au**

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www.pathologytestsexplained.org.au

Please use this QR code to access more information

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Pathology Tests Explained is managed by a consortium of medical and scientific organisations representing pathology practice in Australia. More details at: **www.pathologytestsexplained.org.au/about**

My Health Record

You'll find a direct link to the Pathology Tests Explained website embedded in the pathology results pages of your My Health Record.

Click on the link to find information about what your tests are investigating or measuring and what your results can tell your doctor.