

Script – Broadcast – Understanding Your Medical Results

We've all been there before. We don't feel well or something doesn't seem quite right so we visit our doctor. He or she may order some tests – perhaps lab work, which includes a sample of blood or urine used to help diagnose or detect a specific disease or condition. The doctor's orders might also include diagnostic imaging, such as a CT scan, MRI, ultrasounds or other tests that can potentially help get to the root of what's ailing us.

So the results come back. Now what? What do the numbers mean? How much information should we have and what are the next steps to finding a solution to the problem?

SOT: Dr. William Hook, Family Practice Physician, OSF HealthCare

“As we order labs we may be looking at blood count to show signs of infection or inflammation or signs of anemia or nutritional problems and the same thing goes for a metabolic panel. I call it ‘throwing my fishing net over the side of the boat and see what direction I may go in next.’ An abnormal (result) may guide me to either confirm my clinical suspicion, or may lead me to do additional workup, or your story may suggest I do some imaging.” (:34)

Lab results often show a set of numbers called a reference range or normal values. The range helps show what typical results look like, but not everyone is the same. Some healthy people have results outside the range, while people with health problems can have normal results. Lab results may be negative or normal, positive or abnormal or inconclusive. Sometimes, more testing is called for.

There are many factors that can influence the accuracy of your test results including stress, certain foods, having an illness and medicines.

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“Sometimes a medication that you're taking may affect the test. The significance of that effect is up to the clinician. There are some medicines that may raise potassium, some that may lower potassium, so if that value comes back off the mark then we have to think twice. Do we continue that medicine, do we stop it, or is it one of those slight 5 % deviations that may be perfectly acceptable. All that goes in the total picture.” (:29)

When it comes to diagnostic imaging, a typical radiology report may include sections on clinical information, comparisons to prior scans, findings, and an impression section where all the findings are summarized.

While the patient may see their test results first in MyChart or another online patient portal, Dr. Hook encourages people to wait and speak to their doctor. It's too easy, he says, to misinterpret the results. And researching the findings on the Internet isn't recommended because that can lead to more confusion and worry.

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“If you see a word in there and you look up what it may mean that could drive a lot of anxiety. Call a timeout here and let’s have a conversation with your provider, especially the provider who ordered the report and had the clinical suspicion or saw the clinical need in the first place.” (:19)

Give your doctor a minimum of 24 to 48 hours to contact you with the results. Some doctors, like Dr. Hook, prefer meeting in person if possible.

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“Plan on coming back to talk about the report because there is a lot of language in there that the lay person isn’t going to understand. I have folks come back so I can translate the report and explain where we are going to go next.” (:15)