

Instructions for Sputum Collections

Pathology Patient Information

General information

A sputum culture is requested when a doctor suspects that a person has a bacterial infection of the lungs or airways, such as bacterial pneumonia, which may show as changes in the lungs as seen on a chest x-ray. Symptoms may include cough, fever, chills, muscle aches, fatigue, trouble breathing, chest pain, confusion.

A bacterial infection can reach the lungs in several ways. Bacteria may spread from the mouth and throat to upper respiratory tract, bacteria in oral or gastric secretions may be breathed into the lungs as droplets in the air. These droplets are produced when a person sneezes or coughs and can pass into the lungs.

Sometimes a sputum culture may be requested after treatment of an infection, to check its effectiveness.

Anyone can get a bacterial respiratory infection, but the elderly, those with suppressed immune systems, those with damaged lung tissue, those who are exposed to lung irritants, such

as through smoking, and those with diseases that affect the lungs, such as cystic fibrosis, are at increased risk.

If disease-causing bacteria are found during a sputum culture, then antimicrobial susceptibility testing is usually performed so that the appropriate antibiotics can be prescribed.

The Sputum sample

Sputum is the thick mucus or phlegm that is coughed up from the lower respiratory tract (bronchi and lungs); it is not saliva or spit. Care must be taken in the sample collection process to ensure that the sample is from the lower airways and not the upper respiratory tract. If a sample is mostly saliva, the micro-organisms grown in culture will not necessarily be those causing the infection. Furthermore, the presence of saliva and bacteria from the mouth in a sputum sample make it more difficult to identify disease-causing bacteria in the lungs.

continued overleaf

Preparing to provide your sputum sample

The hospital will provide you with a suitable sterile container and a specimen transport bag.

Make sure the specimen container is labelled with your full name, date of birth and where applicable, your hospital number when sending to the hospital.

How to collect a sputum sample

Wash your hands thoroughly before collection to reduce contamination

- Rinse mouth out with water to remove any food debris and other materials.
- Breathe deeply, cough and spit what is coughed up into the pot.
- If unsuccessful, keep pot by your side and when you have a 'coughing' episode, spit this out into the pot.
- Secure the top of the container tightly and then write the time, date and type of specimen on the container i.e. (Sputum).
- Place into a specimen transport bag and seal.
- Wash your hands after collecting the sample to prevent the spread of any possible infections.

Returning Samples

Please return the sample to the Outpatients Department as near to the production time as possible.

Outpatients Department opening times are:

8.30am to 9.00pm Monday – Friday

8.30am to 3.00pm Saturdays.

Closed Sundays and bank holidays.

While in transit, make sure you keep the specimen upright, if possible. Hand it over to a member of the Outpatients Department together with your request form.

If there is a leakage in transit, then on arrival to the hospital, let the member of staff know that the specimen has leaked. The member of staff will dispose of the specimen appropriately. Whilst this is very rare, leaking samples cannot be tested safely, so you will be required to produce another sample.

Patient Confidentiality

In order to maintain patient confidentiality, The Pathology Laboratory cannot issue results directly to patients or to their relatives, either in person, by telephone or via email. Patients must obtain their results directly from their consultant.

Call: 020 8936 1201 (Outpatients Appointments)

Call: 020 8505 3311 (Main Switchboard)

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