

Choosing Wisely®

An initiative of the ABIM Foundation



STRONGERTOGETHER

Lab tests before surgery

When you need them—and when you don't

If you're going to have surgery, you may have blood and urine tests first. These tests may be helpful if you have certain health conditions or diseases. For example, if you have a blood-clotting problem, a test can show if you're at risk of too much bleeding during surgery.

But most healthy people don't need the tests, especially before low-risk surgery. Here's why:

The tests usually aren't helpful for low-risk surgery.

Many healthy people have routine lab tests before surgery. In these cases, test results rarely change their surgery or make it safer.

The tests are especially unnecessary before low-risk surgery—such as eye, hernia, or skin surgery, or a breast or prostate biopsy. In these and many other surgeries, the risk of complications is very low.

The lab tests can lead to more tests.

Blood and urine tests are very safe, but they can cause false alarms. This can lead to anxiety and more tests. And it can needlessly delay your



surgery. For example, one test may be followed up with a repeat test, an ultrasound, a biopsy, or a test that exposes you to radiation, such as an X-ray or CT scan.

The costs can add up.

Your health plan may not pay for the tests if you do not have a specific medical need for them. If this happens, you may need to pay for them. A routine set of lab tests before surgery costs more than \$100.

Some people get the tests again before surgery, even though they have had recent tests. This is not usually necessary, and it may mean that you pay twice.

When are the lab tests a good idea?

If you have certain health conditions or diseases, or your medical history shows the need, the tests may give your doctor helpful information. For example:

- If you have a health problem that affects bleeding, you may need a blood test to find out if your blood clots normally. You may need this blood test if you bruise easily, take a blood-thinning medicine, had bleeding problems in an earlier surgery or dental procedure, or have a family history of bleeding problems.
- If you have a disease such as diabetes, you will probably need to have a test to make sure it is under control.
- Women of childbearing age may need a pregnancy test.

You may also need the tests before a major operation such as heart, lung, or brain surgery.

Based on the test results, your doctor may watch your condition more closely during or after your surgery. You may need to delay the surgery until a problem is under control. Or your doctor may change the procedures and anesthesia.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

© 2016 Consumer Reports. Developed in cooperation with the American Society for Clinical Pathology. To learn more about the sources used in this report and terms and conditions of use, visit

www.choosingwisely.org/patient-resources