

What are the reasons that healthy asymptomatic patients ask their family physicians for general blood tests?

Michal Shaked^{1,2}, Nir Liviatan^{1,3}, Inbar Levkovich¹, Tamar Adar^{1,3}, Khaled Karkabi^{1,3}

¹Department of Family Medicine, The Ruth & Bruce Rappaport Faculty of Medicine, Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel, ² Maccabi Health Services, North district, Israel,

³Clalit Health Services, Haifa and Western Galilee District, Israel

Introduction:

In Israel, routine blood tests are not recommended for the general population except for lipid profile. Unnecessary blood tests may cause harm due to false positive results, and contribute to higher expenditure in health costs. Patients' requests for "general blood tests" are very common. Family physicians are often in conflict between wishing to comply with their patients' requests and their knowledge of the futility and possible harm of unnecessary blood tests. A better understanding of patients' reasons for asking these blood tests could improve the care physicians given to patients, as well as help design intervention programs at the population level aimed at changing health beliefs and behaviors.

Objective:

To identify the factors which bring healthy asymptomatic patients to ask their family physicians for general blood tests, to reduce unnecessary referrals and to change misconceptions about blood tests.

Methods:

Healthy asymptomatic patients between the ages 20-50 who will ask their family physicians for general blood tests. The study used the qualitative-phenomenological approach. The interview guide addressed patient's health perceptions, relationship with the family physician, factors influencing the decision to ask for blood tests, expectations of the blood tests and perception of the role of the family physician. Data were gathered using in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Results:

Patients shared a number of reasons for requesting blood tests. We found four main themes:

- 1. Illness in friends and family:** Patients told of experience with family members or close friends who suffered serious illness, some of whom died. Young patient spoke of their parents' diseases, especially cancer and diabetes, and their fear of contracting a similar condition.
- 2. Media exposure:** Patients described how learning about a disease through stories, articles and advertisements in the internet or other media, increased their awareness, but mainly increased their worry and fear about the disease.
- 3. General anxiety of becoming ill:** Some participants described how even when not suffering illness or symptoms, they harbor worry and anxiety about their health, and feel that general blood tests will make them feel more secure and calm for a certain period of time.
- 4. Sense of responsibility:** Some participants shared a thought that taking a blood test every year is a responsible act among other things they do in order to stay healthy.

Excerpts from the breast cancer patients:

- 1. Illness in the family:** "My father died of cancer, I think about it a lot...I'm scared of getting sick or something like that". (Oliver, 38 years old)
- 2. Media exposure:** "You always hear in the media that you should discover it early in order to treat it, before it deteriorates metastases and things like that". (James, 22 years old)
- 3. General anxiety of becoming ill:** "It's very important for me to know that I'm really, really healthy... it's important to me not to miss something...". (Amelia, 31 years old)
- 4. Sense of responsibility:** "It seems reasonable once a year... like going to the dentist every six months to get checked...". (Michael, 36 years old)

Conclusions:

- 1. This study provides insight on the main reasons why young healthy adults request blood tests.:**
 - Illness in friends and family members
 - Exposure to intimidating stories in the media
 - General anxiety of becoming ill
 - Sense of responsibility
- 2. The findings improve our understanding of patients' experience, and help us relate to their thought and feelings about blood tests.**
- 3. The present study provides focal points for further research, including quantitative studies which will help us better understand why patients request tests that are often medically unwarranted.**

