



ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT

medical tests

Even doctors say that sometimes the tests they order may not be necessary.

The consequences? Sometimes the tests carry risks of their own. An inaccurate result may lead to even more testing. And of course, your time and money could have been spent on something more useful.

How can you protect yourself from that? What sorts of questions should you ask when your doctor orders a test?

Here's what we recommend:

- “Do I really need this test?” The answer should be direct and simple. Tests should help you and your doctor decide how to treat your problem.
- “What are the downsides?” Discuss the risks as well as the chance of inaccurate results or findings that will never cause symptoms but may require further testing.
- “What happens if I do nothing?” Ask if your condition might worsen—or get better—if you don't have the test now.
- “How much does it cost?”

The answers may surprise you.

For example, here are three common tests that have been identified by medical societies participating in the *Choosing Wisely*[®] campaign as ones that patients should question if they are offered, because sometimes they are not needed.

1 BONE DENSITY TESTS

A bone-density test is a way to measure the strength of your bones. The test, called a DEXA scan, is a kind of X-ray. Many people get a bone-density test every few years.

The main reason to have the test is to find and treat serious bone loss. But most men and women under age 65 probably don't need the test.

- Most people have no bone loss or have mild bone loss (called osteopenia). Their risk of breaking a bone is low.
- A bone-density test gives out a small amount of radiation. But the harmful effects of radiation can add up, so it is best to avoid it when you can.
- The most common drugs to treat bone loss have many risks. Common side effects include upset stomach, difficulty swallowing, and heartburn.
- The treatments have limited benefits. Many people are given drugs because they have mild bone loss. But, there is little evidence that these drugs help them. And, even if the drugs do help, they may only help for a few years.

[Click here to learn when these tests are appropriate.](#) 



2 EKGs AND EXERCISE STRESS TESTS

EKGs and stress tests find out if you are at risk for heart disease and heart attack. An EKG, or electrocardiogram, measures your heart's activity. In an exercise stress test, you have an EKG while you walk or jog on a treadmill.

You may need these tests if you have symptoms of heart disease, like chest pain. Or you may need them if you already have heart disease or you have a high risk for heart disease. These tests can help your doctor measure your chances of having a heart attack and decide how to treat the problem.

But in other cases, you should think twice about having these tests:

- The tests are not useful for people who do not have symptoms of heart disease, like chest pain. There are better and less costly ways to prevent heart disease than EKGs and exercise stress tests.
- These tests can lead to follow-up tests and treatments that you do not need and carry some risks.

[Click here to learn when these tests are appropriate.](#) 

3 ALLERGY TESTS

Allergy tests may help find allergies to things you eat, touch, or breathe in. They are usually skin or blood tests.

However, allergy tests alone are generally not enough. It is important to have an exam and medical history first to help diagnose allergies.

If you don't have symptoms and you haven't had a medical exam that points to an allergy, you should think twice about allergy testing.

- Allergy tests, without a doctor's exam, usually are not reliable. Many drugstores and supermarkets offer free screenings. And you can even buy kits to test for allergies yourself at home. But the results of these tests may be misleading.
- The tests may say you have an allergy when you do not.
- These free tests and home tests for food allergies are not always reliable. Unreliable test results can lead to unnecessary changes in your lifestyle.
- And tests for chronic hives—red, itchy, raised areas of the skin that last for more than six weeks—can show something that may not look normal but is not a problem.

[Click here to learn when these tests are appropriate.](#) 