



Community Infection Prevention and Control Policy for General Practice

(also suitable for adoption by other healthcare providers,
e.g. Podiatry)

Specimen collection

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SPECIMEN COLLECTION

1. Introduction

All specimens are a potential infection risk, and must be collected using 'Standard infection control precautions' (SICPs). Specimens should be transported in a rigid container in accordance with the *Carriage of Dangerous Goods and Use of Transportable Pressure Equipment* (2009).

Taking routine specimens, with the exception of blood samples, should be avoided to help reduce inappropriate prescribing of antibiotic treatment. Specimens should only be taken if there are indications of a clinical infection.

The accuracy of test results from specimens is highly dependent on the quality of the specimen obtained and its subsequent handling.

Always use SICPs and, where required, 'Transmission based precautions' (TBPs), refer to the 'SICPs and TBPs Policy for General Practice'.

When caring for patients in relation to any new or emerging infections, staff should refer to national infection prevention and control guidance.

2. Specimens, containers and transport bags

Wherever possible, reception staff should avoid directly handling specimens due to the risk of infection.

Patient specimens brought into the Practice or collected by staff (in the Practice)

The person who receives or obtains the specimen should ensure:

- SICPs are always applied when obtaining or handling specimens and appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) is worn
- The container is appropriate for the purpose. If there is leakage or an inappropriate container is used, the specimen should be rejected as it will not be processed by the laboratory due to the infection risk
- Care is taken to avoid contaminating the specimen
- The lid is securely closed
- There is no external contamination of the outer container by the contents
- Specimens are placed inside the plastic transport bag attached to the request form after they have been labelled
- The transport bag is sealed using the integral sealing strip (not stapled, etc)
- For large specimens, e.g. 24 hour urine, specimens may be enclosed in individual

clear plastic bags tied at the neck. The request form must not be placed in the bag, but securely tied to the neck of the bag

- Specimens should be placed in a rigid wipeable container. This should be cleaned on a regular basis with a disinfectant wipe

3. Information on microbiology specimen collection

The colour system can vary for the collection containers/tubes depending on the manufacturer used. It is the responsibility of the person obtaining the sample to ensure that the correct container/tube is used for the receiving laboratory. If in doubt about the correct sample or availability of a test, then contact the laboratory for advice.

Whenever possible, specimens for bacterial culture should be collected prior to the start of antibiotic treatment.

Samples of pus are preferable to swabs.

It is the responsibility of the person collecting the sample or handing out the sample container for patient use, to check the expiry dates of the specimen container.



For specimens obtained by the patient, advice must be given to the patient:


- On the correct volumes of the required sample as the laboratory can reject specimens of insufficient volume
- On the optimal time for the specimen to be obtained and when the specimen should be returned to the practice for transportation to the laboratory
- If the specimen has any specific storage instructions whilst awaiting delivery to the practice

Note: *



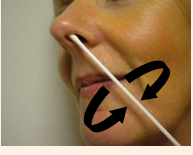

The colour of the specimen container top may vary depending on the manufacturer.

Sample	Key information	Indication	Container
Ear swab	No antiseptic or antibiotic should have been placed in the ear prior to taking the swab.	Swelling, redness, heat, a yellow or green discharge.	Sterile cotton swab in transport medium. Charcoal medium increases survival of bacteria during transportation. If the wound is dry, moisten the swab with sterile 0.9% sodium chloride or sterile water.
Eye swab	Moisten a swab in sterile saline. Hold the swab parallel to the cornea and gently rub the conjunctiva in the lower lid. If for chlamydia testing, send in special commercial chlamydia swab.	Swelling, redness, heat, a yellow or green discharge.	Sterile cotton swab in transport medium. Charcoal medium increases survival of bacteria during transportation. Moisten the swab with sterile 0.9% sodium chloride or sterile water.

Sample	Key information	Indication	Container
Faeces	Open bowel into a receptacle (a container, e.g. ice cream, can be used if washed and dried, or a carrier bag can be used positioned under the toilet seat). Scoop a sample of faeces into the specimen container using the container spoon provided. NB: Faecal specimens can be submitted even if contaminated with urine.	Diarrhoea, increase in frequency, presence of blood, abdominal pain.	Stool specimen container (blue top)*, at least 1/3-1/2 full. 
	Note: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Request ova, cysts and parasites if history of foreign travel If the patient has had antibiotic treatment in the past 12 weeks, request <i>Clostridioides difficile</i> testing 		
Nasal swabs	Gently rotate the swab ensuring it is touching the inside of the nostril. Repeat the process using the same swab for the other nostril (see Section 4). Follow manufacturer's instructions for COVID-19 test.	Advised to provide an MRSA screen.	Sterile cotton swab in transport medium. Charcoal medium increases survival of bacteria during transportation. If the wound is dry, moisten the swab with sterile 0.9% sodium chloride or sterile water.
Penile swab	Retract foreskin. Rotate swab gently in the urethral meatus.	Discharge, UTI, suspected sexually transmitted infection.	Sterile cotton swab in transport medium. Charcoal medium increases survival of bacteria during transportation.
Sputum	Sputum should be expectorated directly into a sterile container. Early morning specimens taken before eating provide the best results.	Productive cough (green or yellow) or presence of blood in sputum.	Plain universal container (white top)*. 
Throat swab	When collecting a throat swab, care should be taken to depress the tongue using a spatula, this avoids touching the buccal mucosa or tongue with the swab. Take the specimen from any area of exudate or inflammation, or over the tonsils and the posterior pharynx. Follow manufacturer's instructions for COVID-19 test.	MRSA screening, tonsillitis, pharyngitis.	Sterile cotton swab in transport medium. Charcoal medium increases survival of bacteria during transportation.
Saliva	For the diagnosis of mumps, saliva swabs should be taken as per the instructions supplied in the sample kit.	Swollen parotid glands.	Sample kit which is obtainable from your local UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) Team.

Sample	Key information	Indication	Container
Catheter specimen of urine (CSU)	Wipe sampling port with 2% chlorhexidine in 70% isopropyl alcohol swab, allow to dry for 30 seconds. Insert syringe into centre sampling port, aspirate urine and remove syringe. Wipe the sampling port with an alcohol wipe.	See Section 6 for UTI diagnosis.	Universal container with boric acid preservative (red top)* which prevents bacteria from multiplying in the container. If sample is less than 5 ml, a white top universal container must be used as the preservative in the red topped bottle will be too potent for a urine sample of less than 5 ml and may kill any organisms. 
Mid-stream specimen of urine (male)	Ask the patient to retract the foreskin and clean the surrounding urethral meatus with soap and warm water. Then urinate first part of the flow into the toilet, collecting the middle part of the flow into a sterile bowl. Pass the remainder into the toilet. Replace foreskin.	See Section 6 for UTI diagnosis.	Universal container with boric acid preservative (red top)* which prevents bacteria from multiplying in the container. If sample is less than 5 ml, a white top universal container must be used as the preservative in the red topped bottle will be too potent for a urine sample of less than 5 ml and may kill any organisms.
Mid-stream specimen of urine (female)	Ask the patient to clean the genitalia with soap and warm water, wiping from front to back. Then urinate, first part into the toilet, collecting the middle part of the flow into a sterile bowl. Pass the remainder into the toilet.	See Section 6 for UTI diagnosis.	Universal container with boric acid preservative (red top)* which prevents bacteria from multiplying in the container. If sample is less than 5 ml, a white top universal container must be used as the preservative in the red topped bottle will be too potent for a urine sample of less than 5 ml and may kill any organisms.
Vaginal/cervical swabs	Low vaginal swab: Insert the swab into the lower part of the vagina and rotate gently but firmly. High vaginal/cervical swab: Should be collected using a vaginal speculum. Wipe away any excess cervical mucus with a cotton swab. Using a sterile swab, sample as high as possible in the vaginal vault, taking care not to touch the lower vagina or perineum.	Routine screening, discharge, bleeding.	Use a sterile swab in transport medium. Chlamydia swab - use a specific swab for Chlamydia specimens and note handling information.
Wound swabs	A sample of aspirated pus is preferred to a swab. However, if there is not enough pus to provide a sample, take a swab of any pus or exudate present. If the swab is to be taken from an ulcer, clean away any debris with saline before taking the swab. Swabbing of dry crusted areas is unlikely to be helpful.	Swelling, redness, heat, a yellow or green discharge, increased discharge of fluid, wound deterioration, fever.	Sterile cotton swab in transport medium. Charcoal medium increases survival of bacteria during transportation. If the wound is dry, moisten the swab with sterile 0.9% sodium chloride or sterile water.

4. How to take a nasal swab for MRSA

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wash hands and apply apron and non-sterile gloves. • Place a few drops of either sterile 0.9% sodium chloride or sterile water onto the swab taking care not to contaminate the swab.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place the tip of the swab inside the nostril at the angle shown. • It is not necessary to insert the swab too far into the nostril.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gently rotate the swab ensuring it is touching the inside of the nostril. • Repeat the process using the same swab for the other nostril.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place the swab into the container. • Dispose of gloves and apron and clean hands after removing PPE. • Complete patient details on the container and specimen form. If for MRSA, request 'MRSA screening' under clinical details on the form.

5. Storage

Wherever possible, obtain a fresh specimen and take the specimen at a time when it can be transported to the laboratory in a timely manner.

For the most accurate results, specimens should be dispatched to the laboratory as soon as possible or at least within 24 hours. After this time, any dominant or more virulent microorganisms will flourish and weaker ones will die which can lead to inaccurate results.

Specimens that are to be stored overnight may require refrigeration in a specimen fridge, check with your local laboratory for storage requirements.

If required, specimens should be stored in a temperature-controlled refrigerator which is not used for vaccine/medication or staff food/drink storage.

6. UTI diagnosis

UTI (urinary tract infection) accounts for at least 23% of all infections and of these, 80% are due to the use of urinary catheters.

Accurate diagnosis of UTI is complex, with symptoms varying between different patient groups. Clinicians should rely on their clinical judgement and use it alongside other recommended resources.

When urinary tract infection (UTI) is suspected, urine should be dipsticked for nitrites and leukocytes only when specific criteria are met. Treating a patient with a positive dipstick in the absence of signs or symptoms of infection may result in inappropriate prescribing of antibiotics.

A 'Diagnosis of urinary tract infections: Quick reference tools for primary care' is available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/urinary-tract-infection-diagnosis/diagnosis-of-urinary-tract-infections-quick-reference-tools-for-primary-care.

'UTI diagnosis in adults: Guide for General Practice' is an adaptation highlighting when to perform a urine dipstick test and when to send urine for culture from each adult patient group (available to download at www.infectionpreventioncontrol.co.uk/resources/uti-diagnosis-in-adults-guide-for-general-practice/).

In response to the impact of UTI on catheterised adults or those over 65 years, the adaptation, 'General Practice guide: diagnosing suspected UTI in catheterised adults OR those over 65 years' provides additional information on interpretation of symptoms and indications for treatment, as well as reinforcing the unreliability of urine dipstick results (available to download at www.infectionpreventioncontrol.co.uk/resources/general-practice-guide-diagnosing-suspected-uti-in-catheterised-adults-or-those-over-65-years/).

7. Labelling

Specimens must be labelled correctly to prevent misdiagnosis and wastage. The specimen request form and the specimen container label must be completely filled in. If using patient identification labels on forms, ensure that the copy section also has a label.

All specimens must be clearly labelled with the correct patient details which include:

- Full name
- Address
- Male or female
- Date of birth and NHS number
- Type of specimen, e.g. catheter or mid-stream urine sample
- Relevant clinical details, e.g. pyrexia, increased confusion, description of the wound, recent foreign travel, recent and current antibiotics
- Date and time of sample collection
- GP and GP Practice details
- Signature (unless electronic form)
- Hazardous groups 3 and 4 organisms, i.e. blood-borne viruses, TB, must have a

'Danger of Infection' label applied to both the container and request form

- Wherever possible, obtain a fresh specimen and take the specimen at a time when it can be transported to the laboratory in a timely manner

8. Disposal of urine samples

Specimens of urine not submitted to the laboratory for further investigation can be disposed of in the following ways:

- Empty the urine into a toilet or sluice. Appropriate PPE should be worn, including facial protection, to protect against splashes. The container should then be disposed of as contaminated/infectious waste, refer to the 'Safe Management of Waste Policy, including sharps for General Practice'
- Check with your local waste contractor to see if they accept solidified liquid waste. If so, solidifying crystals can be added to the container to solidify the urine to prevent accidental spillage. Secure the lid of the urine specimen container and place into an infectious waste bag

Do not contaminate handwash basins or sinks by disposing of urine samples in them.

9. Spillages of specimens

Spillage kits may contain solidifying polymer granules. A National Patient Safety Alert issued in 2017, following a number of deaths and incidents related to patients ingesting the product, advises a risk assessment and procedures in place to ensure supplies are securely stored away from the general public.

- Spillages of blood or body fluids should be dealt with immediately, refer to the 'Safe management of blood and body fluid spillages Policy for General Practice'.
- Should the container leak, a new specimen should be obtained. If this is not possible, wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), carefully decant the specimen into a clean container.
- If the outside of the container is contaminated, it should be wiped immediately with paper towels, then cleaned and disinfected with an appropriate wipe. If the specimen form is contaminated, a new form should be used.
- A 'Spillage kit located at Poster' is available to download at www.infectionpreventioncontrol.co.uk/resources/spillage-kits-located-at-poster/.

10. Transportation

Specimens packaged as above must be transported to the laboratory in a robust, lidded, washable transport box.

11. Infection Prevention and Control resources, education and training

The Community IPC Team have produced a wide range of innovative educational and IPC resources designed to assist your General Practice in achieving compliance with the *Health and Social Care Act 2008: code of practice on the prevention and control of infection and related guidance* and CQC registration requirements.

These resources are either free to download from the website or available at a minimal cost covering administration and printing:

- 27 IPC Policy documents for General Practice
- Preventing Infection Workbook: Guidance for General Practice
- IPC CQC assessment preparation Pack for General Practice
- IPC audit tools, posters, leaflets and factsheets
- IPC Bulletin for General Practice Staff

In addition, we hold educational study events in North Yorkshire.

Further information on these high quality evidence-based resources is available at www.infectionpreventioncontrol.co.uk.

12. References

Department of Health and Social Care (Updated December 2022) *Health and Social Care Act 2008: code of practice on the prevention and control of infections and related guidance*

NHS England (2019) *Risk of death and severe harm from ingesting superabsorbent polymer gel granules* NatPSA/2019/002/NHSPS Public Health England (Updated March 2021) *Guidance COVID-19: safe handling and processing for samples in laboratories*

NHS England and UK Health Security Agency (Updated July 2025) *Diagnosis of urinary tract infections: Quick reference tools for primary care*

Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust (2020) *The Royal Marsden Hospital Manual of Clinical and Cancer Nursing Procedures 10th Edition*

UK Health Security Agency (Updated November 2024) *Appendix 1: sample submission safety considerations*