

Bone marrow tests

What is a bone marrow test?

Bone marrow is the spongy part in the middle of your bones where blood cells are made. You might have a bone marrow test to check for cancer cells in the bone marrow. A doctor or nurse takes a sample of bone marrow from your hip bone. The sample is then sent to a laboratory and looked at under a microscope to check for cancer cells.

Why do I need to have this test?

A bone marrow test can help your doctors to make a diagnosis. It might be done if doctors think you may have a type of leukaemia or lymphoma. This is because cancer cells might be found in the bone marrow with some of these cancers. This test may also be done to diagnose some other types of cancer.

You might also have a bone marrow test to check how well treatment is working.

What happens?

Before the test

Your doctor or nurse will give you information about the test.

You usually have the test under a local anaesthetic. This means you will stay awake, but the doctor will give you an injection before the test to numb the area so you can't feel it. You may also have a tablet or injection to make you feel sleepy and relaxed. Sometimes this is given as gas instead of tablets. You breathe in the gas through a mask or mouthpiece, which you hold yourself. You can have a family member or a friend with you during the test, if you want to.

Or you might have it under a general anaesthetic. This means you will be asleep and will not be aware of what is happening, or be able to feel anything. You will be told not to eat or drink for six hours before having a general anaesthetic.

During the test

Bone marrow is found in big bones like the hip bones and the pelvis. During this test, a doctor or nurse takes a sample of bone marrow from the back of your pelvic bone, just above the hip bone. You have the test while you are lying on your side on a narrow bed.

The doctor or nurse puts a needle through the skin into the bone. Then they use the needle to take out a small sample of the fluid from inside your bone marrow. This is called a bone marrow aspirate. You might find it uncomfortable for a few seconds while the sample is taken.

You may also have a small piece of bone marrow taken. This is called a trephine biopsy. The doctor or nurse puts a thicker needle through the skin into the bone marrow. You might feel some pressure while this is happening. When they take the

needle out, it contains a small piece of bone marrow. They put a plaster over the area, which you can take off the next day.

After the test

You will probably feel sore afterwards. Your doctor or nurse will tell you which painkillers to take. Tell your doctor or nurse if the area where the needle was put in becomes red or swollen, or if it bleeds.

You will usually get the results within a few days. If you had a trephine biopsy, it can take longer. Waiting for results can be a worrying time. Talking to your family and friends about how you feel can help. You can also speak to your doctor or nurse if you have any problems, or if you need more support.