

I need to know about antibodies

Antibodies are important molecules our immune system makes to help protect us against foreign things such as bacteria and viruses. Antibodies can also be formed by exposure to blood with different blood groups.

How do I get antibodies?

Everyone is born with some antibodies. New blood group antibodies can be made in response to natural chemical structures called antigens found on blood cells which the body can be exposed to during pregnancy or from receiving a blood transfusion.

When would I be tested for blood group antibodies?

If you donate blood, some antibodies may be detected during routine testing, in which case you will be notified. You will also be tested if your doctor indicates that blood or blood products may be required as part of your medical treatment.

How will I be tested?

It is a simple blood test using a specimen taken from a vein in your arm.

I have antibodies, what does this mean?

Having antibodies does not affect your general health. They become more important if you were to become pregnant or require a blood transfusion. Not all antibodies are equal in importance in a pregnancy or transfusion situation.

By knowing which antibodies you have, it allows laboratory staff to carefully match (or crossmatch) your blood with donor blood to select the appropriate blood if you need a transfusion. This reduces the chance of a transfusion reaction occurring as a result of these antibodies.

Who do I need to tell?

It is important to let your general practitioner and family know if you have antibodies in case of an emergency situation. You should also let your doctor/ anaesthetist know before surgery so there is time to crossmatch your blood with suitable donor blood for transfusion. A record of your transfusion history is kept by the laboratory that tests and matches your blood. It is useful if you know which laboratory has tested your blood previously as the current laboratory may need to contact them.

Why is my blood crossmatched before a transfusion?

If your blood has not been crossmatched prior to transfusion your antibodies can react to the antigens in the blood you receive. Antigens are substances which our immune system recognises as foreign and attempts to destroy with an antibody. This can cause a severe reaction known as a haemolytic reaction where the transfused red cells are incompatible with the antibodies in your blood and are destroyed. In severe cases this reaction can be fatal.

