



University Hospitals Bristol **NHS**

NHS Foundation Trust

Patient Information Service  
**Respiratory**

# Collecting a sputum sample



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For Patients. For Health. For Bristol.

## **Why do we want to do this test?**

Testing sputum ('phlegm') helps us to tell if there is infection in the lungs, and if so, which bugs are causing the infection.

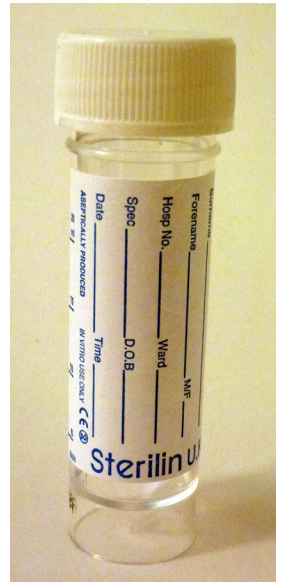
For the sample to be accurate it must come from deep within the lungs. This is usually thick and sticky, unlike saliva from your mouth which is watery and thin.

For some patients it may be necessary to send several sputum samples to the lab to help guide best treatment.

# How do we collect the sample?

The most common way is for you to cough a sample into a sterile specimen pot, which we will provide.

- Drink plenty of fluid the evening before to help loosen the phlegm
- Do the sample as soon as you wake up in the morning, preferably before drinking anything or having breakfast, as this may confuse the results. This is particularly important if the sample is to test for possible tuberculosis (TB).
- Do not clean your teeth or use mouthwash prior to doing the test as this may kill any bacteria in the sputum.
- Take three deep breaths to loosen the secretions (if you have a nebuliser you may want to use this first) and hold the air in for five seconds.
- Take another deep breath and cough hard until some sputum comes up into your mouth then force out a deep cough and bring the sputum up into your mouth
- Spit the sputum into a plastic cup. Remember that this cup is very clean so do not open it until you are ready to use it.
- If you are unable to bring up much sputum (minimum is about the same size as your little finger nail) on the first attempt then try again until you have enough.
- Screw the cap on the cup tightly so it doesn't leak
- Take the sample to your GP surgery or to the respiratory department on the same day.



As well as providing clinical care, our Trust has an important role in research. This allows us to discover new and improved ways of treating patients.

While under our care, you may be invited to take part in research. To find out more please visit:  
**[www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/research-innovation](http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/research-innovation)**  
or call the research and innovation team on  
**0117 342 0233.**

For access to other patient leaflets and information please go to the following address:

**[www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/information-for-patients/](http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/information-for-patients/)**



**Hospital Switchboard: 0117 923 0000**



**Minicom: 0117 934 9869**



**[www.uhbristol.nhs.uk](http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk)**



For an Interpreter or Signer please contact the telephone number on your appointment letter.



For this leaflet in Large Print, Braille, Audio, or Email, please call the Patient Information Service:  
**0117 342 3728 / 3725**

