Why is compliance with testing standards so important?

Regular STI testing is essential to maintaining good sexual health and minimising the spread of infections to other people.

But with more people opting to go private for STI testing rather than relying on public health services, just how trustworthy are these private testing providers? And do they follow the guidelines that help ensure STI testing is safe, effective, and reliable?

It would seem not. In fact, according to a recent study published by the British Medical Journal (BMJ)*, “very few” STI services meet the official standards for sexual health tests.

As an accredited laboratory providing STI testing solutions for occupational health services, medical practitioners, and clinics, we feel it is our duty to educate our partners on the importance of adhering to the correct guidelines for sexual health testing – and the risks involved for patients and partners who may unknowingly use these unregulated testing services.

The British Medical Journal (BMJ) study

In June 2020, researchers compiling the BMJ report* used internet searches to identify more than 30 providers of STI testing.

Many of these services involved ‘self-sampling’, where the patient collects their own sample at home for laboratory testing. However, some also provided the option for ‘self-testing’ – where the patient collects their sample and interprets their own results at home.

Out of those providers included in the study, 26 were private, and five offered free STI testing services commissioned by the NHS.

While there were some problems identified with NHS-commissioned services, these tests were found to be closest to the guidelines set by the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH), the Faculty of Sexual Reproductive Healthcare (FSHR), and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).

However, many issues were discovered with paid-for services, which contradicted national guidelines on sexual health testing, including:

- Tests licensed for professional use only being marketed for self-testing
- Inappropriate infections being tested for
- Incorrect samples being used for testing
- Lack of sexual history taking
- Lack of advice for patients’ post-diagnosis

The findings make for worrying reading and highlight several concerning implications for public health and patient care.

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Why are patients buying privately and what are the dangers of non-compliant STI tests?

The popularity of online tests has surged in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, with many patients choosing to order tests online to avoid the perceived stigma associated with STI tests, and the ‘inconvenience’ of having to book an appointment with a clinic or medical practitioner.

However, the BMJ study shows that ordering an STI test online carries certain risks, especially when the quality of services varies so greatly, and regulation appears to be lacking for online testing providers.

For example, ‘self-testing’ – where the patient collects their own sample and interprets their results themselves – could result in people worrying about a test result that may not be accurate or seeking treatment for the wrong infection.

Similarly, inaccurate tests that don’t adhere to the necessary quality standards can lead to diagnoses being missed, meaning the infection goes untreated.

This poses a serious risk to public health, meaning that infections are left to spread more widely among the population.

What are the guidelines for STI testing in the UK?

Guidelines for STI testing in the UK are set by the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH), the Faculty of Sexual Reproductive Healthcare (FSHR), and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA).

These guidelines cover everything from the recommended testing methods for specific pathogens, samples required, whether the person is displaying symptoms, and the individual’s sexual history.

There are many reasons why adhering to these guidelines is important for any reputable testing laboratory or provider of sexual health testing, including reducing the risks mentioned earlier.

At AlphaBiolabs, we understand the sensitivities surrounding STI testing and the importance of compliance with the guidelines, not only for producing the most accurate and reliable results, but also for ensuring that patients receive proper end-to-end care throughout the process.

That’s why our testing laboratory is accredited to the international quality standard of ISO 17025, and all our STI testing methods and procedures have been developed in accordance with BASHH, FSHR and MHRA guidelines for sexual health testing.

Sources:
Clarke E, Horner PJ, Muir P, et al, Assessment of online self-testing and self-sampling service providers for sexually transmitted infections against national standards in the UK in 2020, Sexually Transmitted Infections Published Online First: 12 April, 2022. doi: 10.1136/sextrans-2021-055318
Accredited STI testing from AlphaBiolabs

AlphaBiolabs is a long-established, highly-regarded and accredited DNA, drug, alcohol & health testing laboratory with a successful track record of providing testing in partnership with numerous clinics, pharmacies, occupational health services and healthcare/medical services providers.

What our Partners say

Partnering with AlphaBiolabs was one of the best decisions we could’ve made. With competitive pricing and one of the fastest turnaround times in the industry for Covid-19 travel testing, we were able to provide the highest possible standard of service for our customers and grow our business. I would highly recommend AlphaBiolabs to any company that has a requirement for laboratory testing.

Director
Flysurance

We have been working with AlphaBiolabs since December 2020 and they have supported us in creating a successful covid testing service for our clients. We have managed to grow our business and gain an unblemished reputation, thanks to the quality, efficient and reliable service provided by AlphaBiolabs.

Matthew Bladon, MD
Bladons Pharmacy

Here are just a few more reasons to choose AlphaBiolabs for your STI testing:

✓ UKAS ISO 17025-accredited
✓ All testing performed at our award-winning UK laboratory
✓ Adherence to strict guidelines for STI testing as set out by BASHH, the FSHR and MHRA
✓ Competitive pricing
✓ Some of the fastest turnaround times in the industry
✓ Comprehensive product range with testing for males and females
✓ Includes the most tested pathogens in the UK such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, herpes, syphilis, and HIV
✓ Dedicated account management team, so you’ll be fully supported throughout the process
✓ Choose end-to-end laboratory testing, analysis, and reporting – or tell us which service you need

Contact our Partners team now on 0333 600 1300 (select option 2) to discuss your bespoke package or email partners@alphabiolabs.com

Learn more about our Partnership Programme including what our partners say about us

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