

Private Screening Tests – Should I pay for one?

As medical technology has improved and become more portable a growing number of private companies, and some NHS hospitals and doctors, have started to advertise medical check-up tests that either are not available on the NHS, or are only provided for particular patients.

The advertisements usually say that the tests can detect potentially serious illnesses in people who feel well, and would not otherwise know they have a problem. Sometimes they are written in a way that can make people feel worried, or they say that the company will only be in your area offering the test for a limited time. Is it worth paying for one of these tests?

Whilst it is true that some of these tests can detect a problem that you did not know about, that is only part of the picture. You also need to know how common the problem is, whether there is any treatment available for it, and how accurate the test results are.

The NHS looks very carefully at screening tests to make sure that the benefits in detecting illness are worth the cost - in other words, it checks that the money could not be spent better on something else. So if you are offered an NHS test such as a cervical smear, breast X-ray or bowel cancer test it is certainly worth having this done.

Private tests, where each person pays for his or her own test, do not have to prove their worth in the same way. Before you make up your mind about having one you should think about asking the test provider a few questions.

What is the chance that this test will detect a condition that needs treating?

Put another way, how many people will have to have the test to pick up one case of the problem being screened for ?

What is my personal risk of having this condition compared to average?

The test provider ought to be able to say if you are more or less likely to have a problem than other people. For example, blood vessel disorders are more common if you smoke, have diabetes or have high blood pressure. If they do not take this into account it may be that your own risk is much smaller than the “average” one that is given.

How accurate is the test?

They should certainly be able to tell you what proportion of people who have the condition will be picked up by the test – remember that no test is 100% accurate so invariably a problem will sometimes be missed. You also need to remember that tests can give “false positive” results, which means they appear to show something that is not actually there. This is important as you can end up having a lot more tests that are not really necessary.

Will the test pick up things that are not important?

Some tests look for just one condition, others, like “whole body scans” are supposed to detect a number of things. This sort of test will sometimes find minor or technical things that are of no long term health importance but can be worrying for you and expensive for the NHS if you need lots more tests to double check. This is perhaps more likely as you get older.

Is there any treatment for the condition detected?

Having a test is all well and good, but you need to know that there is a treatment for any condition that may be found, otherwise could be worrying yourself and spending money for nothing.

If you get good answers to these questions it may be worth going ahead and having the test. But if they cannot answer, brush you off, or try to confuse you with technical jargon, think twice before parting with your money!