

# Medical Biochemistry

## Five Things Clinicians and Patients Should Question

by  
Canadian Association of Medical Biochemists  
Last updated: February 2020



**1 Don't order serum folate testing in the absence of the following: anemia with red blood cell macrocytes or hypersegmented polynuclear neutrophils and a reasonable clinical suspicion of a nutritional deficiency such as an unsupplemented restrictive diet, severe Alcohol Use Disorder, or malabsorption.**

Since 1998, all wheat white flours for food use sold in Canada and United States are enriched with folic acid as a mandatory legal requirement. The main reason for this supplementation is to prevent neural tube defects in newborns. Folates are found in processed food that contains white flour and in green leafy vegetables, legumes, some fruits and beans. Folate deficiency is therefore now encountered very rarely in Canada.

For most patients at risk for folate deficiency, like those with malabsorption, it is more practical and economical to treat with multivitamin supplements including folic acid, than to test for deficiency.

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada recommends universal supplementation for women in the reproductive age group. Investigations are not required prior to initiating folic acid in women considering pregnancy.

**2 Don't order an erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) to screen asymptomatic patients or as a general test to look for inflammation in patients with undiagnosed conditions.**

ESR is a non-specific inflammation marker influenced by various factors including anemia, pregnancy, and smoking. C-reactive protein (CRP) is a less expensive and more sensitive and specific reflection of the acute phase of inflammation, hence should be used for this purpose. In the first 24 hours of a disease process, the CRP will be elevated, while the ESR may be normal. If the source of inflammation is removed, CRP will normalize within a day or so, while ESR will remain elevated for days. Only CRP should be used as a measure of systemic inflammation.

**3 Don't order amylase in addition to lipase to detect pancreatitis.**

In pancreatitis, levels of amylase and lipase have been found to correlate very well. However, multiple studies have shown that lipase is a more sensitive and specific marker of acute pancreatitis than amylase. Moreover, lipase stays elevated longer than amylase, which is useful in cases of delayed presentation. However, false negative results may still be observed after many days, but amylase is not helpful in those cases. For children, pediatric specific reference ranges should be adapted.

**4 Don't request a serum protein electrophoresis in asymptomatic patients in the absence of otherwise unexplained hypercalcemia, renal insufficiency, anemia or lytic bone lesions.**

Serum protein electrophoresis (SPE) is mainly indicated to detect monoclonal gammopathy in patients who have clinical symptoms and signs related to multiple myeloma, amyloidosis, or Waldenstrom macroglobulinemia. It may also be performed in certain uncommon diseases associated with a monoclonal protein like POEMS syndrome and some forms of polyneuropathy.

About 3% of the population above the age of 50, have a monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS). Current practice guidelines do not recommend routine screening for MGUS in the general population because of the lack of proven benefit, absence of actionable preventive therapy and creation of unnecessary anxiety for some patients.

SPE is not a sensitive test to detect inflammation, C-reactive protein is a better and less costly alternative that is more responsive to changes in the patient status.

5

**Don't request uric acid as part of the routine evaluation of cardiovascular risk, obesity or diabetes.**

Although evidence of a causative link between hyperuricemia and cardiometabolic risk is mounting, it still does not support the use of pharmacotherapy and its concentration is not used in equations for estimating vascular risk. Asymptomatic hyperuricemia is a frequent, coincidental, biochemical finding that does not require any treatment.

Uric acid should not be measured routinely, but its measurement may be considered mainly in the following situations:

- Investigation of acute joint pain
- Follow-up of hypouricemic treatment
- Follow-up of patients with kidney disease and kidney stone disease
- Preeclampsia
- Tumor lysis syndrome

## How the list was created

The list was developed under the guidance of a committee formed with the specific intent of producing a list of 5 recommendations. All CMB members were invited to participate and members were nominated by the CMB board executive. The committee members reviewed the CWC guidance on producing recommendations and put forward a number of topics that were refined in discussion during committee meetings. A preliminary list of 22 topics was produced by the committee. A survey of all the membership was conducted by an electronic survey with options to add more suggestions. The ranked result of the survey was discussed with the committee and duplicate results were not considered. Weighting of each topic was reviewed and a list of 5 topics was agreed upon.

## Sources

- 1 Ashraf MJ, Cook JR, Rothberg MB. Clinical utility of folic acid testing for patients with anemia or dementia. *J Gen Intern Med.* 2008 Jun;23(6):824-6. [PMID: 18414954](#).  
Brian M. Gilfix. Utility of measuring serum or red blood cell folate in the era of folate fortification of flour. *Clinical Biochemistry.* 2014 May;47(7-8):533-8. [PMID: 24486651](#).  
Hennessy-Priest K, Mustard J, Keller H, Rysdale L, Beyers J, Goy R, Randall Simpson J. Folic acid food fortification prevents inadequate folate intake among preschoolers from Ontario. *Public Health Nutr.* 2009 Sep;12(9):1548-55. [PMID: 19200405](#).  
MacFarlane AJ, Greene-Finestone LS, Shi Y. Vitamin B-12 and homocysteine status in a folate-replete population: results from the Canadian Health Measures Survey. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 2011 Oct;94(4):1079-87. [PMID: 21900461](#).  
Ray JG. Efficacy of Canadian folic acid food fortification. *Food Nutr Bull.* 2008 Jun;29(2 Suppl): S225-30. [PMID: 18709897](#).  
Theisen-Toupal J, Horowitz G, Breu A. Low yield of outpatient serum folate testing: eleven years of experience. *JAMA Intern Med.* 2014 Oct;174(10):1696-7. [PMID: 25111789](#).  
Wilson RD et al; Genetics Committee, Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada. Pre-conception Folic Acid and Multivitamin Supplementation for the Primary and Secondary Prevention of Neural Tube Defects and Other Folic Acid-Sensitive Congenital Anomalies. *J Obstet Gynaecol Can.* 2015 Jun;37(6):534-52. [PMID: 26334606](#).
- 2 Assasi N, Blackhouse G, Campbell K, Hopkins RB, Levine M, Richter T, Budden A. [Comparative Value of Erythrocyte Sedimentation Rate \(ESR\) and C-Reactive Protein \(CRP\) Testing in Combination Versus Individually for the Diagnosis of Undifferentiated Patients With Suspected Inflammatory Disease or Serious Infection: A Systematic Review and Economic Analysis](#). Ottawa : Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health; 2015 Nov. (CADTH no. 40). [Internet].  
Brigden ML. Clinical utility of the erythrocyte sedimentation rate. *Am Fam Physician.* 1999 Oct 1;60(5):1443-50. [PMID: 10524488](#).  
Buttgereit F, Dejaco C, Matteson EL, Dasgupta B. Polymyalgia Rheumatica and Giant Cell Arteritis: A Systematic Review. *JAMA.* 2016 Jun 14;315(22):2442-58. [PMID: 27299619](#).  
Harrison M. Erythrocyte sedimentation rate and C-reactive protein. *Harrison M1. Aust Prescr.* 2015 Jun;38(3):93-4. [PMID: 26648629](#).  
Mönig H, Marquardt D, Arendt T and Kloehn S. Limited value of elevated erythrocyte sedimentation rate as an indicator of malignancy. *Family Practice* 2002 Oct;19(5):436-8. [PMID: 12356689](#).
- 3 Abu-El-Haija M, Kumar S, Quiros JA, et al. Management of Acute Pancreatitis in the Pediatric Population: A Clinical Report From the North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Nutrition Pancreas Committee. *J Pediatr Gastroenterol Nutr.* 2018 Jan;66(1):159-176. [PMID: 29280782](#).  
American Gastroenterological Association (AGA). AGA Institute medical position statement on acute pancreatitis. *Gastroenterology* 2007;132(5):2019-21. [PMID: 17484893](#).  
Haute Autorité de Santé (HAS). [Évaluation de l'amylasémie et de la lipasémie pour le diagnostic initial de la pancréatite aiguë](#). Rapport d'évaluation technologique. Saint-Denis la Plaine, France : HAS; 2009. [Internet].  
Ismail OZ, Bhayana V. Lipase or amylase for the diagnosis of acute pancreatitis? *Clin Biochem.* 2017 Dec; 50(18):1275-1280. [PMID: 28720341](#).  
United Kingdom Working on Acute Pancreatitis (UKPAP). UK guidelines for the management of acute pancreatitis. *Gut* 2005; 54(Suppl3)1-9. [PMID: 15831893](#).  
Ventrucci M, Pezzilli R, Naldoni P, Platè L, Baldoni F, Gullo L, Barbara L. Serum pancreatic enzyme behavior during the course of acute pancreatitis. *Pancreas.* 1987;2(5):506-9. [PMID: 2444967](#).
- 4 Alberta Health Services (AHS). [Multiple myeloma. Clinical practice guideline LYHE-003](#). Calgary, AB 2015  
Chami N, Simons JE, Sweetman A, Don-Wauchope AC. Rates of inappropriate laboratory test utilization in Ontario. *Clin Biochem.* 2017 Oct;50(15):822-827. [PMID: 28483406](#).  
Go RS, Rajkumar SV. How I manage monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance. *Blood.* 2018 Jan 11;131(2):163-173. [PMID: 29183887](#).  
Institut national d'excellence en santé et en services sociaux (INESSS). [Usage judicieux de 14 analyses biomédicales. Rapport rédigé par Faiza Boughrassa et Alicia Framarin avec la collaboration du Comité d'experts sur la pertinence-OPTILAB](#). Montréal, Québec : INESSS; 2014. 33p. [Internet].  
Khouri J, Samaras C, Valent J, et al. Monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance: A primary care guide. *Cleve Clin J Med.* 2019 Jan;86(1):39-46. [PMID: 30624183](#).  
Moreau P, San Miguel J, Sonneveld P, et al.; ESMO Guidelines Committee. Multiple myeloma: ESMO Clinical Practice Guidelines for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up. *Ann Oncol.* 2017 Jul 1;28(suppl\_4):iv52-iv61. [PMID: 28453614](#).
- 5 James W Lohr et al. [Hyperuricemia treatment and management](#). August 2018. [Internet].  
Khanna D, et al. American College of Rheumatology Guidelines for Management of Gout. Part 1: Systematic Nonpharmacologic and Pharmacologic Therapeutic Approaches to Hyperuricemia. *Arthritis Care Res (Hoboken).* 2012 Oct;64(10):1431-46. [PMID: 23024028](#).  
Paul BJ et al. Asymptomatic hyperuricemia: is it time to intervene? *Clinical Rheumatology.* 2017 Dec;36(12):2637-2644. [PMID: 28980141](#).  
Stamp L, Dalbeth N. Urate lowering therapy for asymptomatic hyperuricemia. A need for caution. *Semin Arthritis Rheum.* 2017 Feb;46(4):457-464. [PMID: 27591828](#).

---

### **About the Canadian Association of Medical Biochemists**

The CAMB is the national association that represents physicians specialized in medical biochemistry, a specialty recognized by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. Medical Biochemists direct clinical laboratories, consults, diagnoses and treat patients with a variety of metabolic disorders and biochemical abnormalities. The CAMB promotes quality and security in laboratory medicine and in the clinical use of laboratory information through education, research, and clinical practice. The CAMB aims to serve and educate the public and also to enhance career opportunities of its members through continuous professional development and advocacy initiatives.



---

### **About Choosing Wisely Canada**

Choosing Wisely Canada is the national voice for reducing unnecessary tests and treatments in health care. One of its important functions is to help clinicians and patients engage in conversations that lead to smart and effective care choices.

🌐 [ChoosingWiselyCanada.org](http://ChoosingWiselyCanada.org) | ✉ [info@ChoosingWiselyCanada.org](mailto:info@ChoosingWiselyCanada.org) | 🐦 [@ChooseWiselyCA](https://twitter.com/ChooseWiselyCA) | 📘 [/ChoosingWiselyCanada](https://www.facebook.com/ChoosingWiselyCanada)