



RACGP
Royal Australian College
of General Practitioners

RACGP Standards for general practices (5th edition) fact sheet

High-risk results identified outside normal opening hours

What the Standards say

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) *Standards for general practices* (5th edition) (the Standards) requires general practices to manage patients' high-risk results outside normal opening hours.

GP2.2▶E: *High-risk (seriously abnormal and life-threatening) results identified outside normal opening hours are managed by our practice.*

You must:

- *have a documented policy that outlines the process for your practice's management for high-risk results identified outside of normal opening hours*
- *give diagnostic services the contact details of the practitioner who ordered the investigation or a delegated practitioner or after-hours service.*

Background

Diagnostic tests help guide general practitioners (GPs), patients and other clinicians to make appropriate decisions about the patient's care. High-risk results need to be communicated to the responsible GP quickly and appropriately to allow suitable action to reduce the risk of adverse outcomes for the patient.

General practices must have systems and protocols for identifying high-risk results outside normal opening hours. This means GPs must advise diagnostic services of appropriate contact details to communicate high-risk results back to your practice, during both normal clinic hours and outside normal opening hours. This contact information could be the requesting GP's phone number and the after-hours and medical deputising service (AHMDS) contact information.

Clinically significant results need to be followed up quickly and appropriately to reduce the likelihood of an adverse patient outcome and medico-legal action.

If your practice engages an AHMDS, you must explain to deputising doctors what you expect of them if they receive urgent and life-threatening results for one of your patients, as they have a responsibility to contact the patient outside normal opening hours if necessary and inform the general practice the following day. This must be documented in a formal written agreement between your practice and the service providing after-hours care.

Good medical practice: A code of conduct for doctors in Australia

The Medical Board of Australia (MBA) provides guidance for doctors regarding the delegation, referral and handover of patient care (6.3.1), noting good medical practice involves:

Ensuring there are arrangements in place for continuing care of patients when you are not available. These arrangements should be made in advance when possible, and communicated to the patient, other treating practitioners and any relevant facilities or hospitals.¹

According to the MBA:

While no one expects doctors to be working 24 hours a day, practitioners who refer patients for tests should have arrangements in place for a medical practitioner to receive and if necessary, action any critical test results, and to make those arrangements clear to other practitioners and patients. The phone number for that practitioner should be included on the request form so that abnormal results that represent a potential serious threat to the patient's wellbeing can be communicated and appropriate timely action taken.²

The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA) guidance

The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA) has published a guideline for the **Management and communication of high risk laboratory results**, which includes guidance to pathologists and other specialists regarding the communication of high-risk results. These guidelines recommend immediate notification of results to the 'clinician immediately responsible for the patient's care', noting the responsible clinician should be contactable to discuss high-risk results at all hours. It is the pathology provider's responsibility to have an escalation procedure to guide laboratory staff in locating an appropriate recipient of the results if they cannot contact the responsible clinician.³

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists (RANZCR) guidance

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists (RANZCR) also requires radiologists to make reasonable attempts to contact the referring doctor to discuss significant results. The RANZCR **Standards of practice for clinical radiology** (section 5.5.2, iii) requires radiology practices to have a protocol for urgent and significant unexpected findings that ensures:

- the reporting radiologist uses all reasonable endeavours to communicate directly with the referrer or an appropriate representative who will be providing clinical follow-up
- a record of actual or attempted direct communication is maintained by the practice
- the reporting radiologist coordinates appropriate care for the patient if they are unable to communicate such findings to the referring clinician.⁴

Frequently asked questions

Do GPs have to include their mobile number on diagnostic referrals?

GPs do not need to include their mobile number on diagnostic referrals; however, they must include an alternative contact number such as the practice's phone number. General practices must still ensure diagnostic services have current contact details of their medical practitioners on file.

My practice has a formal arrangement with an AHMDS. How can they receive urgent after-hours results?

Your practice must explain to deputising doctors what is expected of them if they receive high-risk results during the after-hours period for one of your patients. You must have a formal written arrangement with the AHMDS regarding the communication of urgent results in the after-hours period. Your practice could consider the following factors when developing this formal written arrangement:

- the role of the deputising doctor/s if they receive a call regarding high-risk or life-threatening results for one of your patients (including management of the patient regarding the results, and communicating this to the requesting doctor)

- the mechanisms for the deputising doctor to communicate the high-risk results with the practice
- the correct phone number for the AHMDS service if diagnostic services need to contact them outside normal opening hours
- a recall policy for AHMDS staff to follow when a patient whose regular GP is not available needs to be recalled with an urgent result.

If significant results are received by an AHMDS, it is the responsibility of the after-hours practitioner within the AHMDS to follow up patients with clinically significant results and alert the patient's regular GP/practice.

Other ways to achieve GP2.2▶E

- Contact diagnostic services to ensure they have the correct phone numbers on file for your practice's GPs and after-hours provider.
- Educate your practice team on how diagnostic services can contact clinicians with access to the patient's medical records if they identify high-risk results outside normal opening hours.
- If your practice chooses to include the practice phone number on diagnostic referrals, set up a system for calls to be diverted to an appropriate practice GP or AHMDS outside normal opening hours.

Further information

Contact standards@racgp.org.au for further information.

References

1. Medical Board of Australia. Good medical practice: A code of conduct for doctors in Australia. Melbourne: Medical Board Ahpra, 2020.
2. Medical Board of Australia. News for medical practitioners. Melbourne: MBA, May 2023.
3. Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia. Management and communication of high-risk laboratory results (jointly endorsed by the RCPA and AACB [the Australasian Association for Clinical Biochemistry and Laboratory Medicine]). Sydney: RCPA and AACB, 2023.
4. Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists. Standards of practice for clinical radiology. Version 11.2. Sydney: RANZCR, 2020.