CHAPTER 5

CLINICAL SKILLS AND TOOLS

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Abstract

Clinical laboratory interpretation and diagnostic testing represent essential components of comprehensive medication management. Common laboratory tests provide critical insights into organ function, disease progression, and medication effects, requiring pharmacists to understand indications, limitations, and interference factors affecting result interpretation. Therapeutic drug monitoring optimizes medications with narrow therapeutic indices through appropriate timing, sampling techniques, and clinical decision-making based on pharmacokinetic principles. Point-of-care testing enables rapid clinical decisions through immediately available results for anticoagulation management, glycemic control, and infectious disease screening. Clinical significance assessment distinguishes between statistical variations and meaningful changes requiring intervention, considering patient-specific factors and trending results over time. Reference range interpretation addresses population variations, methodology differences, and condition-specific targets beyond standard laboratory norms. These integrated skills enable pharmacists to effectively monitor medication therapy, identify drug-related problems, recommend appropriate interventions, and collaborate with healthcare teams using objective data to optimize patient outcomes through evidence-based medication management.

Keywords: *Laboratory Monitoring, Therapeutic Range, Pharmacokinetic Assessment, Clinical Interpretation, Diagnostic Testing*

Learning Objectives

After completion of the chapter, the learners should be able to:

- Interpret common laboratory tests relevant to medication therapy including renal function, hepatic function, hematology, and therapeutic drug levels.
- Apply principles of therapeutic drug monitoring including appropriate timing, sampling techniques, and target range interpretation for narrow therapeutic index medications.
- Utilize point-of-care testing technologies for immediate clinical decision-making in areas including anticoagulation, diabetes, and infectious disease management.
- Differentiate between statistically significant and clinically significant laboratory values requiring intervention.
- Analyze laboratory data in the context of patient-specific factors including age, gender, comorbidities, and ethnicity that affect reference ranges.
- Develop monitoring plans incorporating appropriate laboratory tests, frequencies, and parameters based on medication therapy and patient characteristics.

COMMON LABORATORY TESTS

Hemoglobin and hematocrit evaluation assesses oxygen-carrying capacity, identifying anemia potentially caused by medications (chemotherapy, anticonvulsants, NSAIDs), exacerbated by drug therapy (proton pump inhibitors reducing iron absorption), or requiring medication dosage adjustments (erythropoietin-stimulating agents). White blood cell analysis examines total count and differential percentages, detecting neutropenia from myelosuppressive drugs (antineoplastics, carbamazepine, clozapine), infections potentially requiring antimicrobial therapy, or inflammatory conditions affecting medication response. Platelet assessment identifies thrombocytopenia from medications (heparin, chemotherapy, valproic acid) potentially requiring dose adjustment, discontinuation, or alternative therapy selection, while also guiding antiplatelet and anticoagulant management decisions.

Electrolyte Panel Assessment

Sodium interpretation evaluates hyponatremia potentially caused by medications (diuretics, SSRIs, carbamazepine) or hypernatremia from sodium-containing formulations (IV antibiotics, sodium polystyrene sulfonate), with both abnormalities potentially requiring therapy

modification. Potassium analysis identifies hyperkalemia from medications (ACE inhibitors, ARBs, potassium-sparing diuretics, potassium supplements) or hypokalemia from diuretics (thiazides, loop diuretics), insulin, or beta-agonists, requiring either intervention or preventive management. Calcium examination detects hypercalcemia potentially exacerbated by thiazide diuretics or caused by vitamin D toxicity, versus hypocalcemia from medications (bisphosphonates, denosumab, phenytoin) potentially requiring supplementation or drug modification.

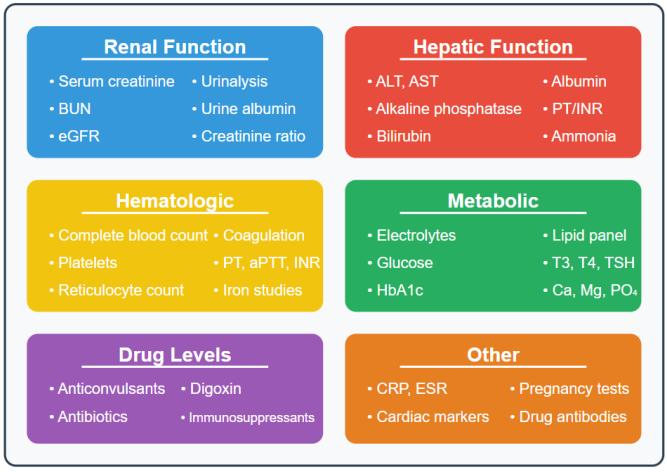

Figure 5.1: Common Laboratory Tests for Medication Monitoring

Renal Function Evaluation

Serum creatinine assessment estimates kidney function, recognizing limitations including delayed response to acute kidney injury, muscle mass dependence affecting interpretation in elderly or cachectic patients, and medication interference (trimethoprim, cimetidine). Estimated glomerular filtration rate calculation applies formulas including Cockcroft-Gault (historically used for drug dosing), MDRD, or CKD-EPI equations, with appropriate selection based on intended use and patient characteristics. Blood urea nitrogen examination provides complementary renal function assessment, with elevations potentially indicating prerenal causes (dehydration, heart failure) versus intrinsic renal injury, influencing medication selection and dosing decisions.

Table 5.1: Common Laboratory Tests for Medication Monitoring

Test Category	Specific Tests	Medication Monitoring Applications	Critical Values/Action Thresholds
Renal Function	Serum creatinine, BUN, eGFR, urinalysis	Renally eliminated medications, nephrotoxic agents, dosage adjustments	SCr increase ≥0.3 mg/dL in 48 hours, eGFR <30 mL/min requiring dose adjustment
Hepatic Function	ALT, AST, alkaline phosphatase, bilirubin, albumin	Hepatically metabolized drugs, hepatotoxic agents, protein binding assessment	ALT/AST >3x ULN, bilirubin >2x ULN requiring therapy discontinuation
Hematologic	CBC with differential, platelets, INR, aPTT	Anticoagulants, myelosuppressive agents, hematologic toxicities	Platelets <50,000/mm³, ANC <1,000/mm³, INR >4.0 without bleeding
Metabolic	Electrolytes, glucose, HbA1c, lipid panel	Diuretics, diabetes medications, cardiovascular agents	K+ <3.0 or >5.5 mEq/L, Na+ <125 or >150 mEq/L, glucose <70 or >400 mg/dL
Cardiac	Troponin, BNP, CK, digoxin level	Cardiovascular medications, cardiotoxic agents, heart failure therapy	Troponin elevation, BNP >500 pg/mL with symptoms, digoxin >2.0 ng/mL
Endocrine	TSH, free T4, cortisol, testosterone	Thyroid medications, hormone therapy, adrenal suppressants	TSH <0.1 or >10 mIU/L, critically low cortisol with symptoms
Inflammatory	ESR, CRP, procalcitonin	Anti-inflammatory agents, infection assessment, autoimmune therapies	CRP >100 mg/L, procalcitonin >0.5 ng/mL suggesting bacterial infection

Test Category	Specific Tests	Medication Monitoring Applications	Critical Values/Action Thresholds
Therapeutic Drug Levels	Anticonvulsant levels, antimicrobial levels, immunosuppressant levels	Narrow therapeutic index drugs, individualized dosing	Drug-specific toxic thresholds (e.g., vancomycin trough >20 mcg/mL)

Hepatic Function Tests

Transaminase evaluation (ALT, AST) detects hepatocellular injury potentially caused by medications (statins, acetaminophen, isoniazid), requiring risk-benefit assessment for continuation, dose adjustment, or discontinuation. Alkaline phosphatase and gamma-glutamyl transferase assessment identifies cholestatic patterns potentially indicating drug-induced injury (amoxicillin-clavulanate, oral contraceptives, anabolic steroids) with different management implications than hepatocellular damage. Bilirubin analysis distinguishes between direct (conjugated) and indirect (unconjugated) elevations, with patterns helping differentiate medication effects on various hepatic processes including uptake, conjugation, and excretion.

Metabolic Assessment

Glucose measurement evaluates hyperglycemia potentially caused or exacerbated by medications (corticosteroids, atypical antipsychotics, protease inhibitors) or hypoglycemia from excessive antidiabetic therapy, requiring dose adjustment or regimen modification. Hemoglobin A1C assessment provides longer-term glycemic control evaluation, guiding diabetes medication selection, dosage titration, and regimen intensification decisions based on target attainment. Lipid panel analysis guides cardiovascular risk management through statin selection and dosing, identifies secondary dyslipidemia from medications (thiazides, beta-blockers, antiretrovirals), and monitors for adverse effects of lipid-lowering therapies.

THERAPEUTIC DRUG MONITORING

Narrow therapeutic index identifies medications where small concentration differences significantly affect safety and efficacy, requiring individualized dosing beyond standardized regimens to maintain optimal range. Pharmacokinetic variability addresses medications with unpredictable absorption, distribution, metabolism, or elimination across individuals due to genetic polymorphisms, organ dysfunction, drug interactions, or physiological differences requiring direct concentration measurement rather than dose-based estimation. Clinical response correlation assesses situations where therapeutic effects or toxicity signs poorly correspond with dosing, including cases of suspected non-adherence, malabsorption, drug interactions, or altered protein binding affecting active drug fraction.

Table 5.2: Therapeutic Drug Monitoring Parameters

Drug Category	Specific Agents	Sampling	Target Ranges	Monitoring
Anticonvulsants	Phenytoin, carbamazepine, valproic acid, lamotrigine	Trough levels, steady state (≥5 half-lives), consistent timing	Phenytoin: 10-20 mcg/mL, Carbamazepine: 4-12 mcg/mL, Valproic acid: 50-100 mcg/mL	Initially monthly, then every 3-6 months or with regimen changes
Antimicrobials	Vancomycin, aminoglycosides, voriconazole	Vancomycin: trough before 4th dose, Aminoglycosides: peak 30 min after infusion, trough before next dose	Vancomycin trough: 10-15 mcg/mL (uncomplicated), 15-20 mcg/mL (severe), Gentamicin peak: 5-10 mcg/mL, trough <2 mcg/mL	Vancomycin: weekly, Aminoglycosides: after 3rd dose, then 2-3 times weekly
Immunosuppressants	Tacrolimus, cyclosporine, sirolimus, mycophenolate	Trough levels, consistent timing relative to dose,	Tacrolimus: 5-15 ng/mL, Cyclosporine: 100-400 ng/mL	Initially 2-3 times weekly, then weekly for 1 month

Drug Category	Specific Agents	Sampling	Target Ranges	Monitoring
Antiarrhythmics	Digoxin, amiodarone, procainamide	Digoxin: sample ≥6-8 hours post-dose, Amiodarone: trough level	Digoxin: 0.8-2.0 ng/mL, Amiodarone: 1.0-2.5 mcg/mL	Digoxin: after 7-10 days, then every 3-6 months, Amiodarone: every 6-12 months
Antipsychotics	Clozapine, haloperidol, risperidone	Trough levels, steady state, consistent timing	Clozapine: 350-600 ng/mL, Haloperidol: 5-15 ng/mL	Initially monthly, then every 3-6 months or with regimen changes
Mood Stabilizers	Lithium	12-hour post-dose, consistent timing, hydration status	Lithium: 0.6-1.2 mEq/L (indication-dependent)	Weekly until stable, then every 3-6 months or with regimen changes
Bronchodilators	Theophylline	Peak: 2 hours post-dose, Trough: before next dose	Theophylline: 10-20 mcg/mL	After 3-5 days, then every 6-12 months or with regimen changes
Anti-rejection	Mycophenolic acid	12-hour trough, 2-hour post-dose (AUC estimation)	Trough >1.3 mcg/mL, AUC 30-60 mg.h/L	Weekly x 1 month, then monthly x 3 months, then every 3-6 months

Anticonvulsant Monitoring

Phenytoin assessment addresses highly variable metabolism, non-linear pharmacokinetics, and numerous drug interactions, typically targeting total concentrations of 10-20 mcg/mL with free fraction monitoring (1-2 mcg/mL) when protein binding alterations exist. Carbamazepine evaluation considers autoinduction requiring dose titration, active metabolite contribution, and interaction potential, generally targeting 4-12 mcg/mL with sampling timing considerations for extended-release formulations. Valproic acid monitoring guides