

Definition

Sputum is a secretion that is produced in the lungs and the bronchi (tubes that carry the air to the lung). This mucus-like secretion may become infected, bloodstained, or contain abnormal cells that may lead to a diagnosis. Sputum is what comes up with deep coughing.

How the Test is Performed

You are asked to cough deeply and spit any sputum in a sterile cup. The sputum is then taken to the laboratory. There, it is placed in a medium under conditions that allow the organisms to grow. The back of the throat is swabbed with a sterile cotton swab near the area of the tonsils and placed in a tube of culture medium. In order to improve the chances of detecting bacteria, the swab may be used to scrape the back of the throat several times.

How the Test will Feel

You will need to cough. Sometimes the healthcare provider will tap on the chest to loosen the sputum. There may be a steam-like mist to inhale to help cough up the sample.

Why is the Test Done

The cultures and tests are done on the sputum to help identify the bacteria that are causing an infection in the lungs or the airways (bronchi).