

Respiratory Function Test (RFT) / Spirometry

What is a Respiratory Function Test?

A Respiratory Function Test (RFT), also known as spirometry, is a common office test used to assess how well your lungs work by measuring how much air you inhale, how much you exhale, and how quickly you exhale.

Why would I need a Respiratory Function Test?

Your doctor may suggest a RFT if they suspect your signs or symptoms may be caused by a chronic lung condition such as:

- Asthma
- Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Diseases (COPD)
- Chronic bronchitis
- Emphysema
- Pulmonary fibrosis

If you've already been diagnosed with a chronic lung condition, a RFT may also be used periodically to check how well your treatment is working and whether your breathing problems are under control.

What happens during a Respiratory Function Test?

An RFT requires you to breathe into a tube attached to a machine called a spirometer. Before you do the test, the technician will give you specific instructions to follow. Listen carefully, and ask questions if something is not clear. Doing the test correctly is necessary for accurate and meaningful results.

In general, you can expect the following during a RFT:

- You'll likely be seated during the test with your feet flat on the floor
- A clip will be placed on your nose to keep your nostrils closed
- You will take a deep breath and breathe out as hard as you can for several seconds into a tube. It's important that your lips create a seal around the tube, so that no air leaks out.

You'll need to do the test at least three times to make sure your results are relatively consistent. If there is too much variation among the three outcomes, you may need to repeat the test again. The highest value among three close test results is used as the final result.

Your doctor may give you an inhaled medication to open your lungs (bronchodilator) after the initial round of tests. You'll need to wait 10 minutes and then do another set of measurements. Your doctor then can compare the results of the two measurements to see whether the bronchodilator improved your airflow.

How do I prepare for a Respiratory Function Test?

Follow your doctors' instructions about whether you should avoid use of inhaled breathing medications or other medications before the test. Other preparations include:

- Wearing loose clothing that won't interfere with your ability to take a deep breath
- Avoid eating a large meal before your test so that it will be easier to breathe

What are the risks with a Respiratory Function Test?

An RFT is generally a very safe test. You may feel short of breath or dizzy for a moment after you perform the test. Rarely, the test triggers severe breathing problems.

There are some risks to patients who have pre-existing conditions or have undergone certain procedures recently. You will be screened beforehand to check you are safe to perform the test.

