

HPA Proficiency Testing Schemes



August 2010

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Introduction

Proficiency testing (PT), also known as External Quality Assessment (EQA), is an important tool in allowing microbiology laboratories to demonstrate the effectiveness of their quality systems. It helps to assure a laboratory, its clients and its accreditation assessors that the results it reports are accurate, meaningful and fit-for-purpose. Health Protection Agency (HPA) staff have many years experience in providing PT schemes for microbiology; we provide PT samples for more than 1000 laboratories in over 100 different countries. HPA PT samples are designed and prepared by microbiologists for microbiologists.

The following information should help you obtain maximum benefits from your HPA Food and Water Microbiology PT Schemes.

Please contact us if you have any further questions. Full contact details are listed overleaf:
foodeqa@hpa.org.uk



Q. Is there a difference between PT schemes and EQA schemes?

A. These terms are now used interchangeably. Both PT and EQA refer to schemes providing inter-laboratory comparisons that are designed and operated to assess laboratory performance in specified areas. The term 'EQA' tends to be used more frequently in the medical field.

Q. What type of PT schemes are provided by the HPA?

A. The HPA provides a wide range of schemes for food and water microbiology laboratories. The agency also hosts the United Kingdom National External Quality Assessment Schemes (UKNEQAS) for clinical microbiology. We can also provide PT samples for other types of microbiology laboratories such as those that test brewery samples.

Q. Are the HPA PT schemes for food and water microbiology accredited?

A. Yes - all the food and water microbiology schemes are accredited by our national accreditation body, the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS).

Q. How will the HPA schemes benefit my laboratory?

A. One of the key benefits is that the schemes will give you confidence that your laboratory is performing its routine microbiology examinations correctly. Participation provides you with an unbiased external assessment of your laboratory's performance which you can use to reassure your clients and also to help to demonstrate your competence to your accreditation assessors. HPA PT samples contain a realistic range of micro-organisms and are designed to challenge your routine methods; however, PT samples will be effective only if you test them regularly and in accordance with your routine procedures. Our team is able to work with you to help you achieve good results for your routine samples and the PT samples.

Q. What do the HPA PT samples look like?

A. The HPA samples are provided in one of two formats. They consist either of mixtures of freeze-dried (lyophilised) micro-organisms in evacuated glass vials or they are LENTICULE discs, a format that is unique to the HPA.

Q. Why does the HPA not provide real food or water samples?

A. Every PT sample batch must be stable throughout the transit and testing periods and must also be sufficiently homogenous. All participants have to receive similar sample material if valid comparisons of performance are to be undertaken. It is difficult to achieve an acceptable level of stability and homogeneity with real food and water samples; expensive and demanding transit conditions are usually required. Some scheme providers organise local or national ring trials using real products but large international schemes, like the HPA's schemes, normally use simulated samples containing preserved micro-organisms.

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Q. What sort of laboratories use HPA PT schemes?

A. A wide range of companies from all over the world participate, including food producers and retailers, private testing laboratories, water companies in the public and private sectors, government organisations and environmental analysts.

Q. How do I choose the right scheme for my laboratory?

A. Information is available from the HPA web-site about all the schemes. However, if you prefer you can telephone us or send an e-mail. The contact details are listed at the foot of this page.

Q. How will I receive my HPA PT samples?

A. Samples for participants in the United Kingdom are usually sent by post. Samples for other countries are dispatched by courier and are often sent via a forwarding laboratory. Normally you will receive your samples within two to five days of dispatch. All samples are sent as diagnostic specimens (UN 3374) in packaging compliant with international regulations.

Q. How do I store my HPA PT samples?

A. We advise you to store your freeze-dried samples in the refrigerator on receipt. LENTICULE discs are more sensitive to ambient temperatures and must be stored at -20°C.

Q. How do I handle my HPA PT samples?

A. Instructions for handling and sample preparation are available from the website in a number of European languages. The link to the website is included on every request/report form that is included with the samples.

Q. How soon will I know whether my results were correct?

A. The intended results are dispatched by e-mail immediately after the deadline date for return of results and are posted on our website.

Q. How are my results assessed?

A. That depends on the scheme and the tests required. We always use robust statistical techniques and we allocate scores for most of our schemes. The HPA scores acknowledge the microbiological significance of your results. Z-scores are also provided for some of the schemes. Further details are available in the Guide to Scoring and Statistics, available from the website.

Q. What is the format for the distribution reports?

A. The reports are very easy to follow. The pages at the front provide the sample details, the expected results, your own

results and our microbiological comments for the samples. Results charts are also included.

Q. What additional technical support is provided?

A. You can contact the HPA PT microbiologists if you require additional advice. Their contact details are provided in every report. They will provide confidential advice and guidance and may also refer your query to one of our specialist scheme consultants, depending on the nature of your query. The HPA employs experts in many fields of microbiology; we can call upon their expertise to help you. One of the key reasons that participants select HPA schemes is the technical support behind the schemes.

Q. My client says I must get all my PT results correct or I could lose their contract. Can HPA help with this?

A. It is very important that you have a dialogue with your clients to ensure that they understand the purposes of PT. If you report incorrect results for your clients' samples it may affect people's health, impact on their reputation and have expensive consequences. Therefore, you need to use PT to challenge your routine processes as robustly as possible. If your clients pressurise you in this way you may be tempted to pay special attention to your PT samples rather than use routine procedures. You might also look for the least challenging PT scheme you can find. This may mean that weaknesses in your system remain undetected. However, you can advise your clients that this approach is flawed and our senior microbiologists will be happy to talk to your clients if this will help.

Q. Are my HPA PT results confidential?

A. Yes. The HPA PT organisers will not divulge any information about your performance to anyone else, even within the HPA. If your clients or accreditation assessors want to see your PT results then they must contact you directly.

Please contact us if you need more information or have any other queries about the HPA proficiency testing schemes or any other HPA products and services.

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