

Online medical-testing services are proliferating as the drive for consumer-driven health care gains momentum, though some medical experts complain that self-ordered tests don't necessarily benefit the consumer.

At least two new online services have sprung up this year touting these low-cost medical tests. MedLabUSA.com and [MyMedLab.com](#) have joined HealthCheckUSA, DirectLab, and others in offering to set up patients for the same diagnostic tests as walk-in lab services, hospitals and clinics. Customers visit a Web site, select a specific test, enter a ZIP Code and receive driving directions to a specimen-collection laboratory. Users pay with credit cards or a health savings account and don't need their doctor's prescription -- unlike walk-in clinics, which typically require a personal physician's approval.

The services provide customers with a receipt to submit for reimbursement from an insurance company or health savings account. Most insurers won't pay for such services, however, unless the patient's doctor has ordered the test. As a result, online customers usually pay upfront for the tests themselves.

Customers are attracted to the online testing services because they are convenient and cut down on trips to the doctor's office. The online broker prepares paperwork for the lab visit, speeding patients through the process once they are at the lab. The online services advertise the labs they use are certified under provisions of a federal lab-safety statute.

The online services say in-house doctors approve requests for tests -- a personal physician's signature is usually required by commercial labs, including Laboratory Corp. of America Holdings, known as LabCorp, and Quest Diagnostics Inc.

"It was just like shopping for anything else online," said Susan Krogness of Cathedral City, Calif., a registered nurse who works in health-care information technology. "I haven't been to the doctor in a while and wanted to see where I stood." She said she didn't consult with her doctor before the tests and figures she won't need to now, since the results didn't raise any concerns.

Such testing services draw mixed reviews from the medical community. Some advocates think they help healthy people monitor their health status, while critics worry that results will be misinterpreted or ignored. Even though companies include an explanation of the results and tell patients to share them with doctors, especially if tests show abnormalities, doctors fear that patients could rely on incomplete data or false readings.

"Do you know what to do with the results?" asked J. Edward Hill, a Tupelo, Miss., family physician and past president of the American Medical Association. Critics admit that the tests may be helpful in limited scenarios -- checkups to monitor cholesterol-fighting statin drugs, for example -- but too often they mislead patients, potentially leading to higher health costs later.

Despite such concerns, some physicians predict that more health systems will start offering online tests as a service to their patients. "Anything that can get people to a higher level of

awareness of their own health status and get them to take some ownership is positive," said Bruce A. Friedman, emeritus professor of pathology at the University of Michigan Medical School.

The medical-testing trend is similar to initiatives undertaken by drug companies in recent years. "Pharmaceutical companies...have taken the product directly to the consumer. 'If you think this drug is right for you,' they say, 'check with your doctor.' That will be happening with blood tests within the next few years," said John Bell, chief executive at Direct Laboratory Services Inc., which operates DirectLabs.com.

Customers include health-conscious people who want tests to monitor their cholesterol, as well as uninsured people who don't want to pay for regular doctor visits. Online and walk-in lab services also target individuals concerned about confidentiality. Other tests include screenings for heart disease, diabetes, iron overload and sexually transmitted diseases. Self-test results don't become part of a medical record, so they aren't reported to insurance companies.

Ms. Krogness says she completed a "wellness panel," an \$85 comprehensive screening that includes liver, kidney, iron and cholesterol tests, after reading about MedLabUSA.com online. An email directed her to a lab operated by LabCorp three miles from her home, and two days later she received an email that told her she could download her results.

A blood test on MyMedLab.com sells for \$45, compared with \$295 at the local hospital, says company president David Clymer. "We're trying to reach people who are stuck in a market where their only option is a hospital lab," he said. "We're not simply 20% cheaper -- we're 20% of [the hospitals' cost]. That's how consumer-driven health [care] is supposed to be."

Advocates maintain that as patients get less face time with their doctors, tests can provide them with helpful information so that they know what questions to ask their doctors. Despite a large potential market and the appeal of cheaper alternatives to hospital tests, the online model remains a tough sell.

Quest Diagnostics, a leading diagnostic-testing company, ended its online retail unit, QuesTest.com, in March because of poor sales performance. "I hated to see them go," said Mr. Bell. He added QuesTest.com helped "legitimize a gray area." Quest Diagnostics, Lyndhurst, N.J., tests patients at walk-in service centers, but those require patients to have a doctor's order.

LabCorp doesn't offer direct-to-consumer tests, citing its desire to keep physicians in the loop. However, most of the online brokers are able to use the LabCorp network for their direct-to-consumer business.

http://online.wsj.com/article_print/SB115076935218484812.html