

Questions about a 'simple blood test' to screen for cancer prompt revealing answer: It's complicated

We often tell our readers to run for the hills whenever they see a news story touting a "simple blood test."

You won't find a better example of why you need to be wary than an exchange between a reporter and a researcher at a news conference at the American Society of Clinical Oncology's annual meeting over the weekend.

A news release heralded a study to map blood biomarkers in people with cancer as bringing the world "one step closer to being able to detect early lung cancer from a simple blood test."

The headline even referred to a "blood test" for lung cancer.

But when asked some pointed questions that any consumer might wonder about, researcher Geoff Oxnard, MD, of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute was compelled to explain that this test isn't a reality.

Alice Goodman, a reporter for the ASCO Post, asked Oxnard how blood analysis stacked up to a low-dose CT scan, the current screening method, in detecting lung cancers.

Oxnard acknowledged that's unknown. He noted that unlike a true screening, where apparently healthy people are checked to find out whether or not they have cancer, analysis of the new approach has so far included people whose cancer status was already known, "so we can't really make that comparison."

~~Goodman then asked how Oxnard envisioned the "blood test" being used.~~

~~The researcher attempted to clarify: "This is not a blood test. This is a sequencing method that needs to be turned into a diagnostic."~~

The journalist asked if the words "simple blood test" used in the news release were misleading.

Oxnard responded: "It has the *potential* to be a simple blood test."

Goodman expressed confusion, prompting Oxnard to insist: "It *will be* a blood test."

[268 words]

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