OSCE checklist for blood culture sampling

An OSCE checklist for blood culture sampling covers checking the indication, identity and allergies, using aseptic non-touch technique, cleaning the skin and the bottle tops, taking blood from a fresh venepuncture site, filling the aerobic and anaerobic bottles correctly, labelling at the bedside and never delaying antibiotics in suspected sepsis.

OSCE checklist for blood culture sampling: steps to practise

1. Clean your hands, introduce yourself and confirm the patient's identity: full name and date of birth, checked against the wristband for inpatients.
2. Explain why the cultures are needed and gain verbal consent.
3. Check the request, whether antibiotics have already been given, and whether the patient may be septic. If so, escalate to a senior using NEWS2 and your sepsis pathway. Cultures should not delay antibiotics.
4. Ask about allergies (chlorhexidine, alcohol, latex and tape) and choose an arm that avoids fistulas, drips and lymphoedema.
5. Collect a blood culture collection set and holder, aerobic and anaerobic bottles, chlorhexidine in alcohol for the skin and wipes for the bottles, gloves, an apron, a tourniquet, gauze, tape and a sharps bin you can reach.
6. Check the bottles are in date and undamaged, and mark the fill level on each bottle.
7. Remove the bottle caps, clean the tops with a chlorhexidine and alcohol wipe and let them dry.
8. Apply the tourniquet and choose a fresh venepuncture site. Do not take cultures from an existing cannula unless a line sample is specifically requested.
9. Clean your hands, put on gloves (sterile or non-sterile with a non-touch technique, as your policy says) and an apron.
10. Clean the skin with chlorhexidine in alcohol for the time your policy states, let it dry fully and do not touch the site again.
11. Insert the needle and fill the bottles to the marked level without overfilling. With a winged collection set, fill the aerobic bottle first. Take culture bottles before any other blood tubes.

12. Release the tourniquet, withdraw the needle, press on the site and put the needle straight into the sharps bin. Never recap.
13. Remove gloves, clean your hands and label the bottles at the bedside against the wristband, without covering the barcodes. Record the site, time and any antibiotics on the form.
14. Send the bottles to the lab promptly and document the procedure.

What candidates commonly forget

- Escalating a septic patient and not delaying antibiotics
- Checking for chlorhexidine allergy
- Not cleaning the bottle tops
- Touching the site after cleaning
- Not letting the skin dry
- Taking blood from an existing line when a fresh site was needed
- Overfilling or underfilling the bottles
- Not labelling at the bedside

Local policy comes first

This is our own practice checklist. Your college, hospital or country may do some steps differently. Where local policy and this list disagree, follow local policy.

Practise the hands-on steps with a classmate or in a skills lab, because an AI patient cannot watch your technique. You can practise the talking part with an AI patient, and try one station free with no sign-up. Next, try Teaching a junior doctor to take blood cultures. Back to the medicine OSCE for MBBS students page: medicine OSCE for MBBS students, or see the full OSCE checklist list.

Common questions

What is the OSCE checklist for blood cultures?

Confirm identity, explain and gain consent, check the indication, antibiotics and allergies, escalate sepsis, clean the bottle tops, clean the skin and let it dry, take blood from a fresh site into both bottles to the marked level, dispose of the needle at once, label at the bedside and send promptly.

Why use a fresh site for each set?

Each set from a fresh venepuncture site lowers the risk of a contaminant growing in every set and being mistaken for true infection.

Do blood cultures delay antibiotics?

They should not. Take them before antibiotics where this does not cause delay. In suspected sepsis, follow your sepsis pathway and give antibiotics promptly.

Which bottle do I fill first?

With a winged collection set, usually the aerobic bottle first. Follow the bottle maker and your local policy.

Sources

- NICE NG51: suspected sepsis
- WHO guidelines on drawing blood: best practices in phlebotomy

Checked 2026-11-13. Fees and rules change, so confirm them with the regulator before you book.