

What the anion gap measures

The **anion gap** is a laboratory measurement that assists doctors in reading your **electrolytes** and determine if your body may have an **acid-base balance** problem. It is usually reported from a blood test that includes **sodium**, **chloride**, and **bicarbonate**, and sometimes **potassium**. The number is not a direct measurement of acid, but it provides clues about whether there are extra acids or **unmeasured anions** in the blood.

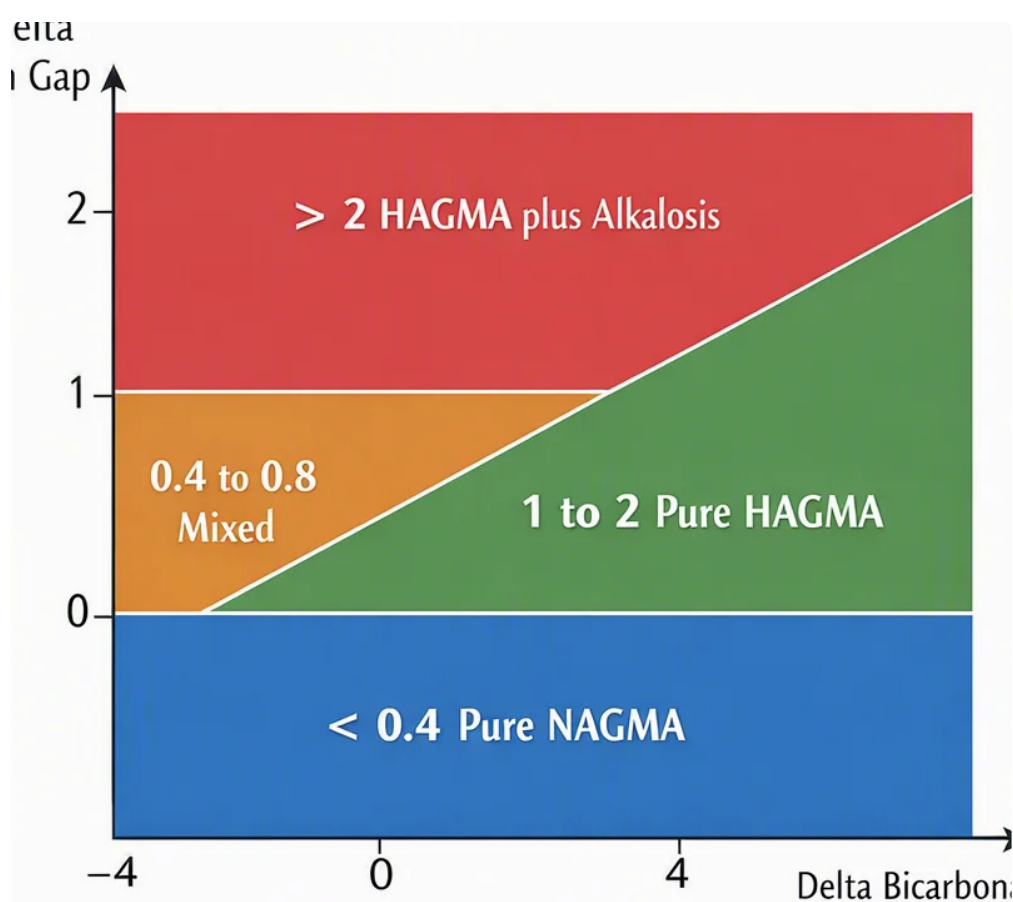
Think of it as a simple overview of your **serum electrolytes** and the body's **buffering system**. When the body is creating or retaining too much acid, the anion gap may rise. That is why the result is often used in the evaluation of **metabolic acidosis**, an **acid-base disorder** [how to compute anion gap](#) that can happen for a variety of reasons.

An **anion gap calculator** can estimate this value using the key electrolyte numbers from a lab report. That calculation aids **clinical interpretation** by helping identify whether a **laboratory result** suggests an **elevated anion gap** and whether more testing may be needed.

Is an anion gap of 20 high?

An **anion gap of 20** is often viewed as high, but the answer depends on the lab's **reference range** or **lab reference range**. Different laboratories use different methods and different reporting systems, so the **normal anion gap range** can change. In some settings, a result around 20 is over the typical **reference interval** and may be labeled a **high anion gap**.

That said, the number alone does not tell the full story. A mild increase can sometimes reflect **lab variation**, differences in [NAGMA causes](#) measurement technique, or a small shift in electrolytes rather than a serious illness. The key is how the value lines up with the rest of the **basic metabolic panel**, your symptoms, and the rest of the **diagnostic evaluation**.



Doctors evaluate the anion gap as part of the bigger picture. A high result can suggest an underlying cause of **acid accumulation**, but it is not a diagnosis by itself. The **medical significance** depends on whether the elevation is persistent, whether other test results are abnormal, and whether there are symptoms of an electrolyte or acid problem.

In practical terms: an anion gap of 20 is a value that warrants attention, but it does not automatically mean an emergency. It usually means your clinician should interpret it together with the rest of the laboratory data and your overall condition.

Typical causes of a high anion gap

A **high anion gap** often indicates **metabolic acidosis**, where acid builds up in the body or bicarbonate is consumed buffering excess acid. A number of conditions can cause this result.

Lactic acidosis occurs when **lactate** builds up, often because tissues are not getting enough oxygen or because the body is under major stress. It can occur with severe infection, low blood pressure, seizures, or other illnesses. Because lactate is an unmeasured anion, it can increase the anion gap.

Ketoacidosis is another leading cause. This can happen when the body breaks down fat rapidly and produces ketones, which are acidic. **Diabetic ketoacidosis** is the most common form, but ketoacidosis can also occur with prolonged fasting, heavy alcohol use, or severe illness.

Kidney disease and **kidney failure** can also increase the anion gap. When the kidneys do not remove acids effectively, the body can develop a buildup of acid and other retained substances. This is why **renal function** is an essential part of the workup.

Other causes include exposure to **toxins** or certain medications. **Salicylates**, such as aspirin in high doses, can contribute to an elevated anion gap and other acid-base changes. Some poisons and drug exposures can also alter the balance of acids and electrolytes.

Less commonly, a high anion gap can be related to severe **dehydration**, which can reduce circulation and worsen acid buildup, or to mixed acid-base conditions that make the laboratory picture more complex. This is why **follow-up testing** matters when the result is abnormal.

In what way an anion gap is calculated

A **anion gap calculation** is typically done from values on a **BMP panel**. The standard **formula** is:

Anion gap = sodium - (chloride + bicarbonate)

Certain labs include **potassium** in the calculation, but most do not. Because potassium is present in a smaller amount than sodium, chloride, and bicarbonate, the result may vary only slightly whether potassium is included. The essential part is to use the identical method your lab uses when comparing results.

A **Anion Gap Calculator** can simplify this process easier by applying the appropriate **equation** automatically. You enter the lab values for sodium, chloride, bicarbonate, and at times potassium, and the calculator provides the estimated gap. This can help patients and clinicians efficiently review a **lab result**, but it should not replace professional **clinical interpretation**.

The cause this number matters is that it helps identify acid from sources other than the usual measurable electrolytes. A rise suggests more **hidden anions** or a loss of bicarbonate in the context of an **electrolyte disturbance**. That is why the anion gap is often used as a clue to acid-base issues rather than as a stand-alone diagnosis.

Manifestations that may happen when the anion gap is high

The symptoms depend on what is causing the elevated value. Some people experience only mild symptoms, while others become very sick. Frequent symptoms that may happen with a high anion gap include **shortness of breath, nausea, confusion, and fatigue**.

Shortness of breath can happen when the body attempts to compensate for **acidic blood** by adjusting the breathing pattern. Nausea can happen with ketoacidosis, toxin exposure, or severe illness. Confusion can be a sign that acid-base changes are affecting brain function or that another underlying problem is present. Low energy is common in many causes of metabolic acidosis because the body is under physiologic stress.

Checking symptoms is important because the same anion gap number can mean different things altogether in different situations. A person with mild dehydration and a small elevation may feel only slightly unwell, while someone with diabetic ketoacidosis or kidney failure may have severe symptoms and need urgent care.

What clinicians review next

When the anion gap is elevated, clinicians usually move to **additional testing** to identify the cause. A **blood gas** is often ordered because it can measure pH and show whether there is true metabolic acidosis, respiratory compensation, or a mixed disorder. This is important for pinpointing the type and severity of the acid-base problem.

A **basic metabolic panel** is also looked at carefully. Doctors check sodium, chloride, bicarbonate, kidney markers, and sometimes repeat the test to confirm the finding. They may also look at **glucose**, since high glucose can suggest diabetic ketoacidosis, especially if the person has diabetes or symptoms of dehydration and illness.

Lactate is another key test, especially if lactic acidosis is possible. Elevated lactate can account for a high anion gap and may point to poor oxygen delivery, infection, shock, seizures, or other stress states. If needed, clinicians may order additional labs to assess for ketones, kidney function, or toxin-related causes.

Because the anion gap is only one piece of the puzzle, doctors use it as part of a broader diagnostic evaluation. They consider the full set of lab values, symptoms, medications, and recent exposures. This approach helps them identify the most likely cause and decide whether the situation is stable or urgent.

When to seek urgent medical care

Obtain prompt medical care if a high anion gap is paired with **dangerous symptoms** such as worsening shortness of breath, severe vomiting, marked confusion, fainting, chest pain, or signs of shock. Such symptoms can indicate a significant acid-base problem, dangerous dehydration, or another condition that needs immediate treatment.

Emergency care is especially important if there is possible **toxin exposure**, including overdose, accidental ingestion, or exposure to substances such as salicylates. If there is known diabetes plus symptoms of illness, rapid breathing, abdominal pain, or confusion, diabetic ketoacidosis must be considered urgently.

Dehydration can also make an elevated anion gap worse, particularly if there is vomiting, diarrhea, poor intake, or heat illness. Severe dehydration can reduce kidney perfusion, impair clearance of acids, and worsen the underlying electrolyte imbalance.

Do not wait for symptoms to become extreme if you have a high lab result and feel significantly unwell. A clinician can decide whether the result needs immediate action, repeat testing, or hospital evaluation. The safest approach is to treat a concerning laboratory result in the context of the full clinical picture rather than relying on the number alone.

Frequently asked FAQs

What counts as a healthy anion gap?

The **expected range** varies by the lab and its measurement method, so the exact **normal anion gap range** can vary. Plenty of labs treat values in the low teens or lower to be normal, but you should always check the specific **lab range** listed with your **test results**. The most accurate interpretation comes from the lab's own **lab reference range**.

Is an anion gap of 20 always dangerous?

No, an **anion gap value** of 20 is not always dangerous. It is often a **high anion gap** and may signal a medical issue, but the risk depends on the cause, the rest of the labs, and whether you have symptoms. Some cases need prompt **doctor evaluation**, while others are less urgent. The overall **medical significance** comes from the full clinical context.

What can cause a high anion gap other than diabetes?

There are many causes besides diabetes. Common ones include **lactate buildup**, **renal disease**, **kidney failure**, and exposure to **poisons** or **salicylate drugs**. Other causes of **acid-base imbalance** can also raise the value, so clinicians usually look at glucose, lactate, kidney function, and the rest of the acid-base picture.

How do you calculate an anion gap from a blood test?

The most common **calculation of the anion gap** uses the **formula**: sodium minus chloride plus bicarbonate. In other words, it is usually calculated from the values on a **metabolic panel**. Some formulas also include **K**. An **Anion Gap Calculator** can do the math quickly, but the result still needs proper clinical interpretation.

When should I call a doctor about an abnormal anion gap?

Contact a doctor if your **test results** show an abnormal **anion gap value** and you have symptoms such as **shortness of breath**, **mental fog**, persistent **queasiness**, or severe **tiredness**. You should seek urgent help for **serious symptoms**, possible **fluid loss**, or any concern for **poison exposure**. A clinician may recommend a **blood gas test**, repeat electrolytes, **blood sugar**, **lactate level**, and other tests to complete the **clinical assessment**.