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Echocardiogram – Patient Information Sheet

Definition

- An echocardiogram or ‘echo’ is a scan that uses ultrasound (sound waves) to produce pictures of the heart.

Why is the test performed ?

- An echocardiogram gives your doctor information about the size of various heart chambers, how well the heart is pumping, and whether there are problems with the heart valves.
- It can also show any other structural abnormalities and the speed and direction of blood flow within the heart and major blood vessels.

How is the test performed ?

- You will be taken into a darkened room. The person performing the test is called a Sonographer, who may be male or female. The Sonographer will usually NOT be a doctor. This means that some questions you may have about the result may have to wait until you see your doctor in clinic.
- You will be asked to undress to the waist and put on a gown that should be left open to the front. You will be asked to lie on a couch on your left hand side. Stickers will be attached to your chest and connected to the machine. These will be used to monitor your heart rate during the test.
- An ultrasound probe covered by a small amount of gel is placed gently on the centre of your chest and will be moved to different positions – beneath the left breast, beneath the rib cage and to the base of your neck. This provides images of your heart from a number of different angles which are then recorded.
- If a standard echocardiogram did not show very clear pictures of your heart, the test may be converted -after your approval- to a contrast echocardiogram. Contrast echocardiogram is a specific type of echocardiogram which uses an ultrasound enhancing agent that is injected into one of the veins in your arms. The agent helps us to see your heart more clearly.
- During the echocardiogram you will hear sounds coming from the machine, which represent blood flow through the heart. the standard echocardiogram will take approximately 30-40 minutes to complete, it may take more time if we have to inject a contrast agent. please review the information sheet titled “Contrast Echocardiogram” for further information.

How to prepare for the test ?

- There is no special preparation for the test. You can take all your medication as normal. You can eat and drink before and after the test as normal.
- You may wear a loose-fitting blouse or shirt. Avoid wearing jewelry or clothes with metal buttons or buckles, because these can interfere with the recording. Women should not wear an underwear bra for the same reason.
- Once the echocardiogram is complete you can get dressed and leave. There are no limitations to what you can do after the scan, for example, you may drive.

How the test will feel ?

- The test is painless, you may feel slight pressure on your chest if the sonographer press harder on the chest to acquire a better quality images.

What the risks are ?

- There are no risks associated with the standard echocardiogram. The test is painless and without side effects or risks from the sound energy used. It does not use radioactivity.
- Some people have a reaction to the contrast agent used during a contrast echocardiogram. This will often only cause mild symptoms such as itching but, in rare cases, a serious allergic reaction can occur.

Special considerations

- If contrast injection is used, there is a slight risk of complications such as allergic reaction to the contrast. Contrast should not be used in pregnant patients who have an echocardiogram.