Exercise Stress Test

What is an exercise stress test?

An exercise stress test shows how your heart works electrically during physical activity. While exercising your heart works hard and fast to pump blood that carries oxygen and nutrients to your body, so the effectiveness is evaluated under stress.

Why is an exercise stress test performed?

It can reveal problems with blood flow within the arteries to your heart, help diagnose coronary artery disease, heart rhythm problems, electrical activity, or help guide treatment plans concerning heart disorders.

How do I prepare for an exercise stress test?

No eating, drinking, or smoking 4 hours prior to the test.

No caffeine 24 hours prior to the test.

Ask your doctor if it's safe for you to continue taking all of your prescription and over-the-counter medications before the test, because they might interfere with certain stress tests.

If you use an inhaler for asthma or other breathing problems, bring it to the test. Make sure your doctor and the health care team member monitoring your stress test know that you use an inhaler.

Wear or bring comfortable clothes and walking shoes. Don't apply oil, lotion or cream to your skin on the day of your nuclear stress test.

What should I expect during an exercise stress test?

An exercise stress test is performed by walking on a treadmill.

The nurse will listen to your heart and lungs prior to testing as well as check your blood pressure and heart rate.

You will be asked to remove any top garments, with the except of a bra, to place the electrodes on the necessary chest areas.

Sticky electrode patches are placed on your chest to detect your heart's rhythm, so the nurse can monitor your hearts electrical activity during stress. Some areas may need to be shaved to help them stick and decrease artifact interference during testing.

After confirming connectivity, your shirt can be put back on.

Your heart beat, blood pressure, and exertion level will be monitored periodically during and after the stress test.

You will start by walking on a stationary treadmill and it will increase in speed and incline every 3 minutes until your minimum target heart rate is reached or you develop symptoms that don't allow you to continue. You can use the railing on the treadmill for balance. Once the minimum target heart rate is reached you will continue to exercise until you fatigue or reach your maximum range of your heart rate. Then a recovery period will begin for approximately 5 minutes or until you return to baseline.

How long does an exercise stress test take?

An exercise stress test takes approximately 30 minutes including preparation and exercise.

Are there any risks or side effects with an exercise stress test?

An exercise stress test is generally safe, and complications are rare. As with any medical procedure, there is a risk of complications, including:

- Abnormal heart rhythms (arrhythmias). Arrhythmias brought on during a stress test usually go away shortly after you stop exercising. Life-threatening arrhythmias are rare.
- Heart attack (myocardial infarction). Although extremely rare, it's possible that a stress test could cause a heart attack.
- Dizziness or chest pain. These symptoms can occur during a stress test. Other possible signs and symptoms include nausea, shakiness, headache, flushing, shortness of breath and anxiety. These signs and symptoms are usually mild and brief.
- Low or high blood pressure. Blood pressure may drop during or immediately after exercise, possibly causing you to feel dizzy or faint. The problem should go away after you stop exercising.

How will my results be communicated?

After the cardiologist has reviewed and interpreted your exercise stress test images, a report will be sent to the ordering physician.

Your doctor will discuss your exercise stress test results with you. Your results could show:

- Normal heart function during exercise. You may not need further tests.
- Normal heart function during rest, but continued symptoms. Your doctor may recommend a nuclear stress test or a stress echocardiogram to evaluate more information regarding your heart.
- Abnormal heart function. Your doctor will use the information to develop a treatment plan or order additional testing.

Your physician will explain the meaning of your test results with you and next steps for your treatment and care plan. A referral to a Cardiologist may be necessary.

How can I get a copy of my results?

Imaging reports can be made available for you to keep or share with other physicians. Please allow 24 hours for record requests. Contact the Cardiology department for all cardiac record requests 540-368-5384. Records can be picked up at the Cardiology department.