National
Heart Programme

Understanding your echocardiogram (echo) test

This factsheet aims to give you information about what an echo test is and how it is done.

An echocardiogram is often called an “echo” for short. There are a few different types of echo tests but the most common type is a transthoracic echo. This leaflet provides information on transthoracic echo tests only. For information on other types of echo, please talk to your doctor or cardiac physiologist.

What is an echo?
An echo is a type of ultrasound scan, which gives your doctor information about the structure of your heart and its surrounding vessels. It is also useful to look at how your heart pumps and fills. Your doctor may refer you for an echo if they need further information about the structure of your heart or to understand how well your heart is working. This information will help your doctor decide on the best possible treatment for you.

What is an echo used for?
An echo will give your doctor more information to help them decide on the best course of treatment for you. An echo can help detect the following conditions:

- Heart failure
- Damage or scarring to your heart muscle or the function of your heart if you have had a heart attack in the past
- Problems with the structure or function of the valves in your heart
- Problems that have been present since birth that affect how well your heart works
- Enlarged heart or increased heart muscle thickness
- Infection of the valves of your heart

How is an echo done?
An echo is usually performed in a hospital or in a primary care centre by a healthcare professional known as a cardiac physiologist or a cardiologist.

You will usually be asked to lie down on a bed with the clothes covering the top half of your body removed. You will be given a blanket or gown to cover yourself during the echo. Small stickers may be placed on your chest. These stickers are used to monitor the rhythm of your heart during the echo. The echo is then performed by putting some gel on your chest and simply placing a probe on your chest to give some moving pictures of the inside of your heart and the surrounding blood vessels. An echo is a similar test to one used to scan babies before they are born. Generally an echo is painless. However, you may feel some pressure on your chest as the healthcare professional tries to get the best possible picture. Unlike an xray, no radiation is used during an echo and is totally safe during pregnancy.

How do I prepare for an echo?
You do not need to do anything to prepare for your echo. Please take your medicines as normal on the day of your test, as advised by your doctor. You do not need to fast on the day of your test.

An echo test will usually take about 30 minutes and you can usually go home soon after it is finished.

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Understanding my results

Once your echo has been completed, it will be reviewed by a cardiologist or cardiac physiologist. A written report will be sent back to the doctor that referred you for the echo test. The results of the test will be discussed with you by your doctor at your next appointment. Your doctor will use the results to decide on the right treatment for you.

How do I make an appointment?

Patients must be referred by a doctor for an echo. Patients must have an appointment in order to have their echo performed, a walk-in service is not provided.