

Procedures/Diagnostic Tests

Exercise tolerance test

You are scheduled for an exercise tolerance test, also called a treadmill or stress test. This test allows your doctor to learn how your heart reacts to exercise. As you walk on the treadmill, an EKG (electrocardiogram) will check your heart's electrical activity. The EKG may show if your heart lacks blood flow or has abnormal heartbeats during exercise. The stress test also helps your doctor decide if you need further tests to evaluate your heart.

Preparation

- Inform the doctor or nurse about any temporary or permanent condition that could affect your ability to move, walk, bear weight, or keep your balance. If possible, discuss this when you are first scheduled for the test. It is also important that the doctor and/or nurse conducting the test have this information.
- Carefully follow your doctor's instructions about medications. Some medications should be stopped for 48 hours before the test; others should not be stopped. If you do not have clear instructions about all your medications (including those for your heart, blood pressure, or other medications), contact your doctor or nurse a few days before the test.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine 8 hours before the test. Do not eat 2 hours before the test, and do not drink liquids 1 hour before the test. If your exercise test is combined with heart imaging (such as a thallium scan), follow the specific instructions for that test.
- Try to be as well rested as possible. You may need to reschedule the test if you feel unwell (for example, if you have a cold). If you do not feel you can give your maximum exercise effort, contact your nurse or doctor before the test. • Wear loose, comfortable clothing with a separate top and bottom. Women should wear bras. Wear comfortable, flat shoes that will not slip off while you are walking.

Procedure

- Before the test begins, your nurse or doctor will explain it to you. Feel free to ask questions and voice concerns at this time. When you understand what will happen, you will be asked to sign a consent for the test to be performed.
- To monitor your heart during exercise, adhesive patches, called electrodes, will be put on your chest. Your chest will be cleansed with alcohol and shaved in some areas (if necessary) before these electrodes are placed.

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- You will be asked about symptoms you have had with exercise in the past. Describe, as completely as you can, any chest discomfort, breathing problems, lightheadedness or dizziness, fluttering in the chest, weakness, fatigue, or anything else you think may be relevant. Also, mention anything you feel while you are being prepared for the test.
 - A nurse or doctor will be with you throughout the test. Your heart rate and rhythm and your blood pressure will be checked during the test.
 - Generally, the treadmill's pace and incline will increase every 3 minutes. It is important that you describe anything you feel as you exercise. If you become short of breath, the nurse may ask you to rate it as "mild," "moderate," or "severe." If you have chest discomfort, you will be asked to describe it as best you can and rate it on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 is very mild; 10 is very severe). There is no right or wrong number. This helps your doctor know how you are doing and gives us a better way to compare how you feel before and after the test.
 - Keep walking until you are told to stop or until you cannot walk any longer. Let the nurse know when you need to slow down. Keep walk-ing as the treadmill slows. Do not jump off.
 - While you rest, your heart will continue to be monitored.

After the procedure

- You can eat and drink as usual.
- Depending on how you feel, you may go about your normal routine or take it easy if the test tired you.
- Do not take a hot shower for at least an hour after the test. Your blood vessels expand with exercise and need time to return to normal. a hot shower may expand them more, causing low blood pressure and dizziness.

If you have questions about this test, please ask. Your nurse and doctor are always ready to help you.

Special instructions

This information is prepared specifically for persons taking part in clinical research at the National Institutes of Health Clinical Center and may not apply to patients elsewhere. If you have questions about the information presented here, talk to a member of your health care team.

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Questions about the Clinical Center?
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