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What is an Echocardiogram?

An echocardiogram is an ultrasound scan of the heart. It is sometimes just called an 'echo'. Ultrasound is a very high frequency sound that you cannot hear, but it can be emitted and detected by special machines. The scan can give accurate pictures of the heart muscle, the heart chambers, and structures within the heart such as the valves.

What happens during the test?

You will need to undress to the waist and lie on the couch. A probe is placed on your chest (it is a bit like a very thick blunt pen), also, lubricating jelly is put on your chest so the probe makes good contact with the skin. The probe is connected by a wire to the ultrasound machine and monitor. Pulses of ultrasound are sent from the probe through the skin towards your heart. The ultrasound waves then echo ('bounce back') from the heart and various structures in the heart.

The amount of ultrasound that echoes back depends on the density of the tissue the sound has hit, therefore, the different structures send back different echoes, for example, ultrasound travels freely through fluid so there is little echo from blood in heart chambers, but, heart valves are dense tissues so ultrasound waves hitting a valve will echo back clearly. The echoes are detected by the probe and are sent to the echocardiogram machine. They are displayed as a picture on the monitor. The picture is constantly updated so the scan can show movement as well as structure, for example, the valves of a heart opening and closing.

The operator moves the probe around over the skin surface to get views from different angles. Some abnormalities can be seen quite clearly, for example, damaged heart valves, thickened heart muscle, some congenital heart defects, etc.

The test is painless and takes about 30-45 minutes. You may have to turn on your side during the test so the operator can scan the heart from different angles.

You do not need any special preparation before the test so you can eat and drink normally before and after the test and continue to take your usual medication.