

Exercise tolerance test



An exercise tolerance test (ETT) is a good way to see how your heart behaves during exercise. A nurse will use an electrocardiograph (ECG) to monitor your heart's activity and see how your blood pressure and pulse change during the test.

What happens?

The entire appointment takes about 30 to 40 minutes. The exercise part takes about 15 minutes.

Small electrodes are attached to your chest to record the electrical activity of your heart. Small areas may be shaved to get better skin contact. Wires connect the electrodes to the ECG machine. An ECG and your blood pressure are recorded at rest.



You will then be asked to exercise on a treadmill or an exercise bike. The exercise starts at a very easy pace, and is gradually made harder by increasing the speed and slope of the treadmill, or by putting some resistance on the bike wheel.

Electrocardiograph tracings are made while you exercise, and you will also have your blood pressure and heart rate measured from time to time. These are checked again at the end of the test to make sure everything returns to normal.

The test may be stopped if:

- you have an abnormal heart rate, chest pain, high or low blood pressure, shortness of breath or feel dizzy
- there are major changes in the ECG
- you ask for a rest.

Why is an exercise tolerance test done?

While you exercise, your heart beats faster and needs more oxygen, which it gets from blood. The test shows if your heart can supply itself with enough blood during exercise.

The exercise tolerance test helps nurses and doctors to:

- work out possible causes of chest pain and other symptoms
- find out if arteries to the heart are narrowed or blocked
- assess your general fitness
- find irregular heart rhythms during or after exercise
- monitor your heart's response to treatment.

How do I get ready for an exercise tolerance test?

You cannot eat or smoke for at least an hour before the test. The last meal you eat should be light, not a hot cooked meal. You can drink water, tea or coffee but not alcohol. If you have diabetes, you may have to adjust your medication that day.

Please phone the cardiac department of the hospital for further advice.

What do I need for the test?

Please bring a list of your current medications and any further appointment dates with your cardiologist/doctor.

You may also like to bring a comfortable pair of walking shoes or bare feet, and comfortable clothes.

What are the risks of an exercise tolerance test?

An ETT is generally safe, and complications are rare but may include low blood pressure and abnormal heart rhythm. These problems should resolve with rest.

Although extremely rare, it is possible that an exercise tolerance test could provoke a heart attack.

Key points

- A exercise tolerance test uses an electrocardiograph (ECG) to check how your heart works during exercise
- The appointment takes about 30 - 40 minutes. The exercise part takes about 15 minutes
- You will be asked to exercise on a treadmill or an exercise bike
- You can ask for a rest at any stage
- The test is generally safe, and complications are rare.