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The Exercise ECG

Patient Advice & Education



london medical
heart

Why an Exercise ECG?

Your Doctor has advised that your heart should be investigated with an exercise test, on a treadmill or static cycle ergo meter.

This investigation is used to gauge many different aspects of heart function: from investigating the likelihood of narrow coronary arteries in individuals at risk of coronary artery disease, to assessing the functional capacity of the cardiovascular system prior to non-cardiac surgery or to provide advice on fitness training and weight loss.

For diagnostic exercise tests we do not advise stopping any medication prior to the test. However, for some exercise tests, specifically those requested to fulfil criteria for special driving or pilot's licences, there are categories of medication that need to be discontinued prior to performing an exercise test. Special advice will be needed from your doctor/cardiologist for these types of tests.

Preparation

You may find it more comfortable to bring soft sole shoes/trainers and a change of clothing with you on the day. Women may prefer to wear a loose fitting blouse that buttons in front, along with shorts or trousers. There are facilities here for you to shower afterwards if required. If your test is scheduled for the morning, a light breakfast can be eaten. Likewise with lunch, if an afternoon test is to be performed. Do not eat anything heavy for at least an hour prior to the test. Continue to take your usual medication unless otherwise advised by your doctor. If fasting blood tests are also ordered for the same day, please ensure you adhere to fasting times and we will ensure you have adequate time to have something to eat before the exercise test.

What happens?

A consent form is routinely requested to comply with the best standards of clinical practice, even though exercise tests are generally much less prone to produce problems than individuals undertaking unsupervised exercise.

The ECG and blood pressure will be monitored throughout the procedure. The ECG is recorded using the familiar sticky plaster electrodes used for the standard ECG, recording and the blood pressure with an arm cuff.

The clinic uses an incremental treadmill protocol where both the speed of the track and its gradient are increased every three minutes. You will be asked to walk and then jog on the treadmill with the exercise level increasing in stages. This will continue until the predicted maximum heart rate is achieved or symptoms, fatigue or measurements dictate that the test is ended sooner. At maximum, no longer than fifteen minutes of exercise is required.

Risks

Exercise testing is an extremely safe procedure with a low complication rate. Despite this, if you develop any symptoms such as discomfort or shortness of breath, it is important that you tell staff immediately. Serious complications during the test occur in a very small number of cases. At the clinic trained personnel and full emergency resuscitation equipment are always on hand.

There are certain situations where an exercise test is not advised:

- Within 6 weeks of a heart attack, unless specifically organised by a cardiologist
- Uncontrolled angina (chest pains), especially if these are occurring at rest
- Severely elevated blood pressure
- Significant valve disease, especially aortic stenosis
- Severe heart rhythm disturbances
- Recent leg vein thrombosis
- Recent pulmonary embolism
- Significant anaemia

If the nurse/technician is uncertain, greater clarification will be sought from the referring doctor and the test may have to be re-arranged in order to ensure your safety.