

What happens in an exercise test? Information for patients

Your doctor has decided that they would like you to have an exercise test

What is an exercise test?

An exercise test is an electrocardiogram (ECG) recording of your heart rhythm, recorded by a computerised machine whilst you are exercising. It is sometimes also called an exercise ECG, Exercise Tolerance Test, or a stress test.

Why is it done?

This test is used to look for changes in heart rhythm or blood pressure during exercise, to find out if blockages in arteries are limiting you, or as part of a fitness to drive assessment

How is an exercise test done?

You will be asked to allow a healthcare scientist access to your chest (ladies can usually keep their bra on). Your skin will be abraded (rubbed with fine sandpaper) in order to provide good contact between the skin and the electrode. You may find this uncomfortable. Baseline recordings will be made before you begin the exercise. Your blood pressure will also be measured during the test.

What does it involve?

The exercise is usually done on a treadmill (running machine), which has a moving belt for you to walk on. There is a handrail for balance. The speed and slope of the treadmill will be altered during the test. The test follows an internationally recognised programme of stages, which means that heart specialists everywhere would be able to interpret the results. From start to finish the test will take approximately 30 minutes.

You should only eat a 'light meal' before the test; you should not consume anything that is very heavy or filling. Additionally, it is important that you have not smoked, or drunk tea or coffee in the two hours prior to your test. You should also bring with you any medication that you are taking. It is advisable not to wear any necklaces or chains.

Like most tests, this test carries a risk. The risk of significant complications is around 1 in 10,000. This includes the need for hospitalisation and in extreme cases the risk of death, however this is rare. You will be asked to verbally consent to this before the test is started. If you have any questions or worries, please do not hesitate to ask your technician when you come in for your appointment.

We do not routinely allow friends or relatives into the test room with you, however if you or someone you care for has additional needs please let the team know on the day.

If you require this information in another format, such as a different language, large print, braille or audio version please ask a member of staff or email patientexperience@uhb.nhs.uk.