HEART TESTS

Understanding your ECG

An ECG is usually one of the first heart tests you will have. This leaflet explains what it records, the different kinds, and what happens on the day.

What is an ECG?

An electrocardiogram — ECG for short — is a simple, painless test that records the **rhythm, rate and electrical activity** of your heart.

Ten small sticky patches called electrodes are placed on your arms, legs and chest. Wires connect them to a machine that picks up the electrical signals which make your heart beat, and prints them onto paper. An ECG has some limitations, so you may be offered other tests as well.

Why you might have one

- Symptoms that could be a heart attack
- A heartbeat that feels too fast, too slow or irregular
- Before starting certain medicines
- Suspected coronary heart disease
- You already have a heart condition, or one that affects it
- While you are taking certain medicines

The main kinds of ECG

Resting ECG

Electrodes on your arms, legs and chest while you lie still. The whole test takes a few minutes. This is the one most people mean by “an ECG”.

Exercise ECG

Recorded while you walk on a treadmill or cycle, to show how your heart behaves when you are more active. Done in hospital.

24-hour ECG

A small recorder worn on a belt for 24 to 48 hours, sometimes longer. Useful for symptoms that come and go, such as palpitations.

Event recorder

For symptoms that happen only now and then. You record a trace yourself at the moment you feel them, over a longer period.

Reasons people are often referred

Palpitations | An irregular pulse | Dizziness or fainting | Breathlessness | Chest discomfort | A known heart condition | Heart problems in the family

Please turn over for how to get ready, what happens on the day, and when to get help.

Getting ready

Easy-off top
Wear a top you can take on and off easily.

No creams or talc
Skip body lotion, oil and talcum powder — patches stick better without them.

Shaving
A small area of chest may need shaving and cleaning first.

Sensitive skin
Some electrodes are very sticky. Tell the team beforehand if that affects you.

Ask for a chaperone
Someone you know, or a member of staff, can be in the room with you.

Exercise ECG only
Avoid a heavy meal or caffeine before a treadmill or bike test.

What happens on the day

1. You undress the top half of your body behind a screen, then lie back.
2. Sticky electrodes go on your arms, legs and chest, and connect to the machine.
3. You lie still for a few minutes while it records. Moving can affect the result.
4. The patches are peeled off — a bit like a plaster. A slight rash can follow.

Phone 999 or go to A&E if

You or someone else has palpitations together with:

- dizziness
- sudden shortness of breath
- chest pain
- loss of consciousness

Contact your GP practice if

You have palpitations and:

- they keep coming back
- they are getting worse
- they last longer than a few minutes
- you have a heart condition, or heart problems run in your family

Your results

You may get your result the same day, though some kinds of ECG take longer to report. A doctor, nurse or specialist should explain what it shows and what happens next — which is sometimes a further test.

An **abnormal ECG does not always mean something is wrong** with your heart, and because the test has limitations it is read alongside your symptoms and examination rather than on its own. Ask if anything about your result is unclear.

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