

Echocardiogram (ECHO)

An echo ('echocardiogram' or 'cardiac ultrasound') is a diagnostic procedure that provides a huge amount of information about the heart's structure and function:

- The size and function of all four heart chambers will be assessed.
- Each segment of heart muscle will be examined to determine if it contracts normally.
- The heart's four valves will be examined in detail to detect any restricted opening (stenosis) or back leak (regurgitation).
- Pressures inside the heart will be estimated (left ventricular filling pressure, pulmonary pressure).
- Abnormal connections between the heart chambers will be detected ('ASD', 'VSD').
- Enlargement of the outlet artery ('aorta') or inlet vein ('inferior vena cava') will be detected.

All this is obtained with no risk to you, because an echo does not use cancer-causing X-rays, and the echo camera ('transducer') is outside your body, placed on the skin of your chest.

The procedure takes approximately 30 minutes. During that time, you will lie on your left side in a darkened room.

The person taking the pictures (the 'sonographer') will use a special gel and rub the probe over your chest to get images of your heart from different angles. The test is usually painless, but for some patients the sonographer will have to push quite hard against your chest. This is because it is extremely demanding to find the gaps between your ribs that provide good pictures.

The sonographer will be concentrating hard throughout the procedure.

Sonographers are expert at obtaining high quality echo information about your heart. However, they do not know all the clinical details of your case and they are not trained doctors. Therefore, they are not in a position to let you know precisely what is wrong or what has changed with your heart. Your cardiologist is best placed to give you this information, once they have reviewed the echo pictures and interpreted them in the context of the other details of your case.