

What is an Echocardiogram?

An echocardiogram or 'echo' is a scan that uses ultrasound waves to produce images of the heart. It is a painless procedure that doesn't have any side effects. An echo uses no radiation and is safe. An echocardiogram is used to diagnose heart defects and to gain a better understanding of how the heart is functioning

An echo is similar to an ultrasound many woman have had of their unborn baby; however the echo focusses specifically on the heart and the blood vessels around the heart.

Preparing for your child's Echocardiogram

Your child should continue to take all of their usual medications and eat and drink normally unless told to do otherwise (see sedated echocardiogram below). It may be helpful to bring your child's comforter (dummy or special toy) if they have one and any snacks or drinks that your child might require. You may find it helpful to dress your child in clothing that is quick and easy to remove. A front buttoning shirt/onesie is ideal.

What happens during an Echocardiogram?

Your echo will be performed by a Sonographer (qualified specialist) or a Doctor. They will explain the procedure to you and your child before they start so that they can answer any questions. Parents / guardians and siblings are able to stay in the room throughout the procedure however it is important to keep distraction to a minimum wherever possible. If you wish you can cuddle or comfort your child while they are having their echo.

Your child will need to undress to the waist. A gown or covering will be provided to maintain modesty and enable your child to feel as comfortable as possible. They will need to lie on their back and/or their left side on a small bed. Three stickers attached to long leads (called electrocardiogram) will be applied to the chest to monitor the heart rate. While the echo is being done there is a television your child can watch from the bed.

The lights in the room will be dimmed to make it easier for the Sonographer to see the ultrasound screen. An ultrasound probe covered in gel (usually warm gel) is moved over the chest, abdominal area and neck in order to obtain images of the heart and surrounding blood vessels. This enables us to see images of their heart from a number of different angles. Your child will feel pressure from the probe but shouldn't feel any discomfort / pain.

The sounds you may hear from the echo machine are the sounds of blood flowing from one chamber to another. The colours you see represent the direction the blood is flowing. Red is flow towards the probe, and blue is flow away from the probe.

An echo takes anywhere from 15 minutes to 1 hour to complete depending on whether it is your child's first time having an echo (first echos take longer than follow up ones), how co-operative your child is, how easy it is to obtain the images and what information the doctor is wanting to know. Once the echo is complete the gel will be wiped off, ECG stickers removed and they can get dressed.

What happens after the Echocardiogram?

Your child's echocardiogram will be reviewed by a Doctor. If an appointment has been made to see a Cardiologist (heart specialist) immediately following the echo then the results will be discussed at that stage. If no appointment has been made to see a Cardiologist (heart specialist) then the results will get sent to the Doctor who asked for the echo.

Sedated Echocardiogram

Your child may require sedation for their echocardiogram. If so then a mild sleeping medication is used that is taken by mouth. The choice of medication to be used is based on your child's weight and their age. Parents/guardians of children requiring sedation will be notified before the day of the echo appointment; ie when the appointment is first booked.

If your child requires sedation, it is important that he/she must have an empty stomach. No fluids or solids for 4 hours prior to the appointment time. Allowing your child/baby food and/or water within this 4 hour timeframe will result in the sedated echo being cancelled.

A Doctor will examine your child first to check if they are well enough to have sedation. If your child is unwell the procedure may be postponed until they are well again. If your child is to be sedated, we ask that effort be made to keep your child awake until after the sedation medication has been given. Postponing their nap will help your child fall asleep faster and stay asleep longer with the sedation.

Questions

If you have any questions about your child's appointment, please phone (09) 307 4949 ext 23623