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AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
FAMILY PHYSICIANS



EKGs and exercise stress tests

When you need them—and when you don't

EKGs and stress tests are tests to find out if you are at risk for heart disease and heart attack. An EKG, or electrocardiogram, measures your heart's activity. In an exercise stress test, you have an EKG while you walk or jog on a treadmill.

You may need these tests if you have symptoms of heart disease, like chest pain. Or you may need them if you already have heart disease or you have a high risk for heart disease. These tests can help your doctor measure your chances of having a heart attack and decide how to treat the problem.

But in other cases, you should think twice about having these tests. Here's why:

Usually, you do not need these tests if you do not have any symptoms.

The tests are not useful for people who do not have symptoms of heart disease, like chest pain. Yet, many people with no symptoms have an EKG as part of their routine checkups.

For example, in 2010, Consumer Reports did a survey of nearly 1,200 people between the ages of 40 and 60. These people had no history or



symptoms of heart disease. Yet almost half had had an EKG in the last five years. And almost one out of ten had an exercise stress test.

There are better and less costly ways to prevent heart disease than EKGs and exercise stress tests. See the next page.

These tests can lead to follow-up tests and treatments that you do not need.

EKGs and exercise stress tests will not harm you. But the results can be unclear. This can lead to other tests and treatments that do have risks.

For example, if the results of your EKG are unclear, your doctor may order a coronary angiography. This can expose you to as much radiation as 600 to 800 chest X-rays. Radiation has effects that can add up, so it is best to avoid it when you can.

EKGs and exercise stress tests can also lead to unnecessary treatments. You may be given drugs you do not need. Or, you may have a procedure called angioplasty to force open the arteries in your heart. This can help some people, but for many, lifestyle changes and medicine are just as good. Angioplasty causes a heart attack in one to two out of every 100 patients.

The tests can be a waste of money.

An EKG costs about \$50, and an exercise stress test costs about \$200 to \$300, according to HealthcareBlueBook.com. Why waste money on tests you do not need? And if they lead to more tests and treatments, it can cost thousands of dollars.

When are EKGs and exercise stress tests needed?

In some cases, it can be important to get these tests. You should probably have an EKG and an exercise stress test if you have symptoms of heart disease, such as chest pain, shortness of breath, an irregular heartbeat, or heavy heartbeats. You may also need the tests if you have a history of heart disease. And you may need these tests if you have diabetes or other risks, and you want to start exercising.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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Advice from Consumer Reports

How should you protect your heart?

These steps can help protect your heart, whether you have heart disease or just want to prevent it.

Know your risks. Talk to your doctor. Your risk of heart disease depends on many things, such as your age, sex, cholesterol, blood pressure, and if you smoke or have diabetes. Use our heart risk calculator at ConsumerReports.org/heartrisk.

Lower your risks. The best ways to lower your risk of heart disease are to:

- Avoid smoking.
- Lose extra weight.
- Exercise regularly—brisk walking helps.
- Manage stress.
- Limit salt.
- Avoid foods that are high in cholesterol, saturated fat, and trans fats.
- Ask your doctor if you should take low-dose aspirin.



Have your blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar tested regularly. These tests are proven, low-cost ways to help measure your risk of having heart disease.

- **Blood pressure.** You should be tested at least once a year by a doctor using a blood-pressure cuff.
- **Cholesterol.** You should have a blood test for cholesterol at least every five years after age 34 (for men) and age 44 (for women). The test should be the kind where you fast first.
- **Blood sugar.** You should have a blood test at least once every three to five years to measure your blood sugar (glucose). Too much glucose can harm your blood vessels.

If your blood pressure, cholesterol, or blood sugar are too high, work with your doctor to lower them. Most people can lower cholesterol and blood pressure with lifestyle changes and medicine. This reduces the risk of heart attacks and strokes.