

Featuring Dr. Graham Wong, MD, MPH, FRCPC, FACC, Acute Cardiac Care, Cardiologist

Duration: 2 minutes, 23 seconds

An echocardiogram is an ultrasound that is performed on the heart. It is the same technology as an ultrasound that is used, for example, for pregnancy. Except instead of obviously looking at the uterus, we're looking at the heart.

And the purpose of an ultrasound of the heart is to understand the structures, as well as the function of the heart in terms of its pumping function, its relaxation properties, as well as how well the one-way valves work. We can also get other information such as indirect assessment of pressures inside the chambers of the heart, as well as an understanding of the sac that lines the heart. The idea of an echocardiogram is it gives us a good understanding of the net effect of all the sub-systems of the heart, on how the heart performs.

Well, an echocardiogram is a fairly commonly-used test for cardiologists and for internists, and it is used when there is some question about whether or not someone has an abnormal function of either the cardiac performance, or an abnormal function in one of the valves.

And we would use it to assess whether or not the heart is weak, whether the heart is strong but unable to relax, or whether or not one of the one-way valves is damaged or is dysfunctional in a way that either prevents it from opening or causes it to leak.

Common conditions in which an echocardiogram is used to diagnose are conditions in which you're suspicious that a patient has a weak heart, or if a patient has dysfunction of one of the valves, and you're considering surgery or some other method to replace or repair that valve. These would be cases in which valves don't open properly, because of end-stage changes that cause arthritic changes, or conditions which lead to incompetence of the valve, causing regurgitation.

Echocardiograms should be done in an accredited facility. Mostly they are done in hospitals, but they are private facilities. But ensure that they're accredited, and they should be overseen by physicians who have special accreditation and/or training in echocardiography.

If you have any further questions about an echocardiogram, you should speak to your family physician, or potentially even a specialist who performs echocardiography.