The Emily Program

The eating disorder specialists

What is an EKG and Why Do I Need One?

An EKG is a test that looks at the electrical activity of your heart. An EKG translates the heart's electrical activity into wave tracings on paper. The heart has two upper chambers (the atria), and two lower chambers, called ventricles. The heart has a natural electrical system which causes the heart muscle, atria and ventricles to contract. This contraction makes blood pump through the body and lungs.

Why do I need an EKG?

There are many reasons to need an EKG. Eating disorders can have significant cardiac implications and damage the heart. Other reasons an EKG might be ordered for you include:

- To determine the cause of unexplained chest pain
- Find the cause of shortness of breath, dizziness, fainting or rapid/irregular heartbeats (palpitations)
- Check how well certain medications are working and whether they are causing side effects which affect the heart
- Determine the impact of cigarette smoking, hypertension, high cholesterol or diabetes on the heart muscle

How is an EKG performed? Will it hurt?

No, an EKG does not hurt. It is completely non-invasive and only collects information on the electrical activity of your heart. There is no risk of pain, electrical shock, or discomfort. There are no contraindications for an EKG, anyone can have one done. It is perfectly safe.

To start, you will lie on an exam table. Electrodes will be placed on the skin of your chest, arms, and legs. These electrodes have a special gel on them which helps to improve conduction, and might feel cold at first. Leads will be connected to each electrode and then the wave tracing can be started. You may leave undergarments and clothing that is not restrictive on during an EKG.

It is important that you lie still, breathe normally, and do not talk during the EKG. It should take less than 10 seconds to complete. Once done, the electrodes can be removed from your skin.

What happens next?

Your doctor will read your EKG and determine if there are any changes that require additional follow up.

Other things you need to know about an EKG:

- An EKG cannot predict whether you will have a heart attack
- EKG can appear normal even if you have heart disease
- Sometimes, EKG changes can only be seen if done while you are exercising, this is called a Stress EKG