

Holter monitors/event recorders

What is a Holter monitor?

A Holter monitor is a portable way of taking an electrical trace of your heartbeat over a period of time (usually 24 hours) while you go about your normal day-to-day activities. The machine records this trace so that a technician and cardiologist (heart doctor) can review your heart rhythm and report back information about your heart to your general practitioner. The test can help pick up if your heartbeat is too fast, too slow or irregular.

What is an event recorder?

An event recorder is very similar to a Holter monitor – it also takes a trace of your heartbeat over time. The difference is that you wear the event recorder for longer (eg. 1–3 weeks) and you take it off for showering. Although the machine still records all the time, it can't store all that information so you need to push a button if you experience symptoms and the machine will store the trace from before and during that time.

There is a third type of monitoring, called 'implantable loop recorder', which records the heartbeat for several months, but this is less common and usually only needed if Holter or event recording doesn't identify the problem.

Why should I wear one?

Holter monitors and event recorders can help explain what is happening to your heart rhythm and why you are having palpitations (racing heartbeat), 'funny turns', dizziness, blackouts or fainting. The decision as to which monitor is best for you is usually made according to how often you experience symptoms and the likelihood that the monitor chosen will 'catch' one of the episodes.

Is it safe?

Holter monitors and event recorders are safe and painless – there is no danger in having the test done. However, it may not be the best test for you if you are very unwell, have chest pain or if you live alone and are fainting frequently. If this applies to you, discuss this with your GP as similar monitoring can be done in a hospital.

Do I need special preparation?

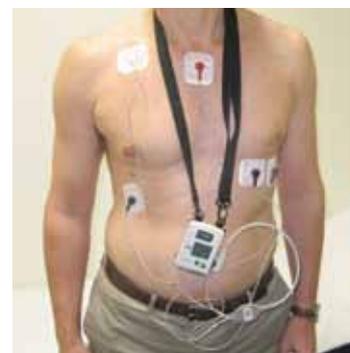
There is no need to fast and you can take all your usual medications. It's wise to shower beforehand and to wear loose upper clothing. Don't put creams on your chest, and if you wear a medication patch put it out of the way of where the sticky dots will go (see photo.)

What does it involve?

You need to book a time for the test and attend a laboratory to have the monitor fitted by a technician. Usually they will perform an electrocardiogram (ECG) first. (This is a more formal trace of the heart, which involves lying for several minutes on a bed with electrical leads connected by sticky dots to your chest and limbs.) After this the technician will fit the monitor for you. This will involve having sticky dots and fine electrical cords connected to your chest: five for a Holter and two for an event recorder. It's important that they stick well, so for men, some chest hair may need to be shaved. For a Holter monitor you keep the monitor on for 24 hours so you can't shower once you have been connected up. For an event recorder, the technician will teach you how to put the dots and leads on and off as you will need to take the monitor off for showering. Keep wearing the monitor at all other times and push the button if you experience any symptoms. Some people experience minor skin irritation from the glue on the sticky dots. Both tests are painless and it is not possible to receive an electrical shock from the machine. The monitor recorder itself is usually about the size of a mobile telephone and is worn on your belt or in a pouch hanging around your neck (see photo). It runs on batteries with no need for external power. With many types of clothing it is impossible for other people to know that you are wearing the monitor. It takes about 10–15 minutes to have the monitor fitted and removed.

What will it cost?

Medicare covers some of the test, but there will usually be some additional cost to you. Discuss this with your GP and when you book in for the test.



What about the results?

The results from your monitor need to be collated and will be reported to your GP within a week or so. As each situation is different, you usually need an appointment to discuss what your results mean with your GP. Sometimes the monitor will find a clear cause for your symptoms, which clarifies what the next steps are. However, for 1–2 out of every three patients who have this type of monitoring the cause still isn't clear. This may be because the symptoms didn't occur while the monitor was running. Sometimes you will need to see a cardiologist or other specialist for an opinion about what could be causing your symptoms.

What else can I do?

As heart health is important, make sure you are aware of everything you can do to minimise your chance of heart problems – your GP can help so consider making an appointment for a 'check up'. Getting your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels checked and under control are a good start. Quitting smoking, keeping to a healthy weight and exercising regularly are also really important (check with your GP when it is safe for you to start an exercise program).

Further information?

Your GP can provide you with more information about monitoring. General information about heart health is available from the Heart Foundation at www.heartfoundation.org.au/Pages/default.aspx.

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