Right Heart Catheterization

What is a Right Heart Catheterization?
A Right Heart Catheterization is a procedure where a long, thin tube called a “catheter” is put into one of the large veins in your groin, arm or neck. The catheter enters the right side of your heart. The doctor can measure pressures in the right atrium (upper chamber), right ventricle (lower chamber) and pulmonary artery (the blood vessel leading to the lungs). Blood samples may be taken through the catheter for testing. Your doctor may also give you intravenous medication or ask you to perform simple exercises using light weights or cycling as part of this test.

Why do you need a Right Heart Catheterization?
These are some of the reasons why your doctor might order your test:
- To evaluate a problem with the valves inside your heart.
- To measure increased pressures in the arteries between the right side of your heart and your lungs (pulmonary hypertension).
- To determine if there is an abnormal opening between the chambers in the heart.
- To see if you need further evaluation for a heart transplant.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of prescribed medications.
- To further evaluate symptoms of fatigue and shortness of breath.

How long does a Right Heart Catheterization take?
The catheterization itself takes 30 to 60 minutes but that does not include steps before and after the procedure. Your family can expect you to be gone at least one to two hours.

Before your Right Heart Catheterization
You will be asked not to eat or drink anything for several hours before your test. A specific time will be told to you by your doctor. Check with your doctor about taking your usual medications on that day, especially diabetic medications, blood thinners and diuretics (water pills).

The usual preparation for a Right Heart Catheterization includes:
- Asking questions about your medical history and allergies.
- Your doctor will discuss the procedure and risks involved and will answer your questions. You will be asked to sign a consent for the catheterization.
- Taking your blood pressure, heart rate, temperature and pulse oximetry.
- Starting an IV (intravenous) line in a vein in your arm or hand.
- Removing jewelry and dentures. You may want to leave valuables at home.
- You may be given some medications to help you relax.
During the Right Heart Catheterization

- You will be taken on your bed to the cardiac catheterization laboratory (cath lab). There you will be assisted onto a padded x-ray table. The area where the catheter will be placed will be shaved and scrubbed with a special soap and draped with a sterile cover. EKG patches will be put on your chest so that your heartbeat can be monitored and blood pressure will be taken frequently.
- Using x-rays as a guide, the doctor will position the catheter, take x-ray pictures, pressure readings and blood samples.
- While the catheter is in place, you may feel palpitations or “skipping.” This is very common, due to the catheter being placed inside your heart.
- The doctor may ask you to hold your breath for a moment to obtain a better recording of the pressures. The doctor may direct you to perform simple exercises in order to gain additional information.

After the Right Heart Catheterization

The catheter will be removed from your insertion site and pressure held to prevent bleeding for 5 to 15 minutes. A dressing will be applied to the site. Your nurse will frequently check your blood pressure, pulse and dressing site and allow you to eat and drink. You will be on bedrest for one to four hours and may not be allowed to drive home after the procedure. Call the nurse if you are having pain, numbness, bleeding, swelling or tingling in the area where the catheter was placed and before getting out of bed for the first time.

Your doctor will discuss the results with you and your family. You will also be informed of any changes in your medications or additional testing needed. You will need to schedule follow-up appointments with your cardiologist or primary care doctor.

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem. Aurora Health Care is a not-for-profit health care provider and a national leader in efforts to improve the quality of health care.