

Stress tests: what a 'positive' result means

A positive stress test is a clue, not a sentence — here is what the test actually found, and what usually happens next.

Understanding the diagnosis

Educational draft. Clinical review pending. Quotations retained from the original text are not verified member testimonials.

A stress test records how your heart behaves when it has to work hard — usually on a treadmill or exercise bike, or with a medicine that safely mimics exercise — while an ECG, an ultrasound, or a camera watches what happens to your heart muscle.

The test exists for one reason: some problems only appear when the heart works harder than it does on the sofa. A “positive” result means the test found something worth investigating — and for most people, that is exactly what they needed it to do.

What 'positive' means — precisely

Positive here does not mean good news, and it does not mean you are dying. It means the test detected evidence that part of your heart muscle received less blood than it needed during the stress — doctors call this ischemia. It is a signal: “worth looking at the pipes.” It is not a diagnosis of how many arteries are blocked, where they are, or what treatment you need. Those questions are answered by the next test — usually an angiogram, which looks at the pipes directly.

Two things the result does not tell you

- A positive test can happen without any blockage — false positives are well known, more common in some people (including many women), and the angiogram sorts this out.
- A negative test is reassuring but not absolute — no test is perfect, and a small narrowing can still be there. This is why teams treat symptoms, not just reports.

What it means for you

If your result was positive, you are not being punished and nothing is “over.” The test did its job: it found a clue. Most people with a positive result go on to have an angiogram, and whatever that shows, there is a plan for it — medicines, a stent, bypass, or careful monitoring. The hardest part of this stage is usually the waiting, and the waiting is a normal part of the process, not a sign that something is being hidden from you.

“When they said 'positive', I thought the worst. Nobody told me it just meant 'worth a closer look'. The closer look turned out to be fixable — and knowing that in advance would have saved me a week of fear.”

What to ask your team

- How much of my heart muscle was affected, and how severe was the finding?
- What is the next test, and when will it happen?
- What should I do — or avoid — between now and then?
- If the next test is clear, what does that mean for my symptoms?

Take it to your team

Ask for the result in numbers and in words: what did the test show, and what does it change about today's plan? Write the answer down — the words will blur in the car on the way home.

Call for help if

Between now and your next appointment, you get chest pain at rest, pain that lasts longer than a few minutes or keeps coming back, or chest pain with breathlessness, sweating or faintness. Do not wait for the next test — call for emergency help.

A positive result narrows the list of possibilities; it does not close the book. Your team will read it together with everything else they know about you — and the decisions will be made with you, not over you.

Questions to take to my team

☐ How much of my heart muscle was affected, and how severe was the finding?

☐ What is the next test, and when will it happen?

☐ What should I do — or avoid — between now and then?

☐ If the next test is clear, what does that mean for my symptoms?

For discussion and personal reference. Your care team's individual instructions take priority. For an emergency, contact your local emergency service; do not wait for a community reply.