

ERCP (Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangiopancreatography)

Endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) is used primarily to diagnose and treat conditions of the bile ducts, including gallstones, inflammatory strictures (scars), leaks (from trauma and surgery), and cancer. ERCP combines the use of x rays and an endoscope, which is a long, flexible, lighted tube. Through the endoscope, the physician can see the inside of the stomach and duodenum, and inject dyes into the ducts in the biliary tree and pancreas so they can be seen on x rays.

If the exam shows a gallstone or narrowing of the ducts, the physician can insert instruments into the scope to remove or relieve the obstruction. Also, tissue samples (biopsy) can be taken for further testing.

Possible complications of ERCP include pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), infection, bleeding, and perforation of the duodenum. Except for pancreatitis, such problems are uncommon. An ERCP takes 30 minutes to 2 hours.

Preparation

Your stomach and duodenum must be empty for the procedure to be accurate and safe. You will not be able to eat or drink anything after midnight the night before the procedure, or for 6 to 8 hours beforehand, depending on the time of your procedure. Also, the physician will need to know whether you have any allergies, especially to iodine, which is in the dye. You must also arrange for someone to take you home—you will not be allowed to drive because of the sedatives. The physician may give you other special instructions.

