Endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) is a procedure that uses endoscopy, x-ray, and dye to view the biliary tract and pancreatic ducts. Endoscopic refers to a tool called an endoscope; retrograde refers to the direction (backward) the endoscope injects a liquid for x-rays; cholangio refers to the bile duct system; and pancreatography refers to the pancreas. The process of taking these x-rays is known as cholangiopancreatography.

What Is Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangiopancreatography for?

ERCP can help find and possibly treat some health issues found in the bile duct system and pancreas and possibly help you avoid surgery. During the procedure, tools can be passed through to relieve a blockage or narrowing in the biliary/pancreatic duct caused by stones, tumors, or scarring. This can also help relieve jaundice caused by blocked bile ducts. ERCP can find the cause of the pancreatitis or inflammation and help prevent future attacks.

Before the Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangiopancreatography

Follow the instructions your doctor’s office gives you to prepare for the ERCP. General instructions may include listing all your medicines (prescription and over-the-counter) and any allergies, telling your doctor if you have any implanted electromedical devices, as well as if you have had surgeries on your stomach or bowel, swallowing problems, or other gastrointestinal problems. You may also be told not to eat or drink for at least 6 hours before this test.

During the Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangiopancreatography

You will be given medicine to block pain and make you relaxed and sleepy, so you do not feel much during the procedure. You may feel full during the test, because air may be put in to help move the scope. A numbing spray may be put on the back of your throat to ease discomfort, and a bite block may be placed within your mouth to protect your teeth and the endoscope. Once you are fully relaxed, the endoscope will be passed through your mouth into your esophagus, then into your stomach and duodenum, and then possibly into the pancreatic or common bile duct.

After the Endoscopic Retrograde Cholangiopancreatography

You will be cared for in a recovery room until the medicine wears off and you are more alert. You will need to take it easy for the rest of the day and arrange for a family member or friend to listen to the discharge instructions and take you home. You may feel some minor issues such as bloating, and you may pass a lot of gas right after the test. You may also have brief changes in your stool. These should go away in less than 24 hours. Your doctor or nurse will review the ERCP results with you and give you any other details you may need, such as next steps.