

## What is an ultrasound scan?

An ultrasound scan is an investigation to create an image on a screen of the organ or body part being examined using sound waves. It is carried out by medical doctors and specially trained health care professionals (sonographers). The scan is performed using an ultrasound probe that gives out high frequency ultrasound waves. These sound waves cannot be heard. The size and shape of the ultrasound probe depends on the part of the body being examined.

## Why should I have an ultrasound?

Ultrasound scan is used to help in making a diagnosis so that appropriate treatment can be offered. If you have any concerns about having an ultrasound scan, please discuss this with the member of staff who will be performing the examination.

## Are there any alternatives?

In some cases, ultrasound scanning has no alternatives but an MRI or CT scan can be used instead or in addition to ultrasound scanning.

## Are there different types of ultrasound scans?

The types of ultrasound scans commonly used in obstetrics and gynaecology are:

1. External abdominal ultrasound scan – the probe is moved over the skin
2. Internal (vaginal) ultrasound scan – the probe is inserted into the body (vagina)
3. HyCoSy or Aqua scan – this scan is performed to assess the uterine cavity and patency of fallopian tubes

## When is a transvaginal (internal) ultrasound scan needed?

The internal (vaginal) ultrasound scan allows the probe to be placed inside the vagina so that it is closer to the pelvic organs being examined. This provides clearer pictures of the uterus, ovaries and abnormalities that may lie deep in the pelvis.

## How should I prepare for an ultrasound scan?

Before having some types of ultrasound scan, you may be asked to follow certain instructions to help improve the quality of the images produced. You may be advised to drink water and not go to the toilet until after the scan – this may be needed before a scan of your unborn baby or your pelvic area. You can eat as normal and you do not need to starve.

There will be a toilet nearby to empty your bladder once the scan is complete.

An external ultrasound scan is most often used to examine your unborn baby (after 10 weeks of pregnancy) or when an internal scan cannot be performed to examine the pelvic organs. A small handheld probe is placed on your skin and moved over the part of the body being examined. A lubricating gel is put on your skin to allow the probe to move smoothly. This also ensures there's continuous contact between the probe and the skin. You shouldn't feel anything other than the probe and gel on your skin (which is often cold). If you're having a scan of your womb or pelvic area, you may have a full bladder that causes you a little discomfort.

For an internal (vaginal) ultrasound scan, you will be advised to empty your bladder and then undress completely from the waist down. A hospital gown or sheet will be given to cover you. You will be asked to lie on your back on the ultrasound couch. A chaperone is always present for this scan. Your knees will be bent and your feet will be on movable foot rests. The knees will then be raised in a way that allows the scan to be performed easily. A thin elongated ultrasound probe is used for this procedure. It will be covered with a protective sheath and lubricating gel and then gently inserted into the vagina. The ultrasound probe will need to be moved into different positions in order to visualize the uterus and ovaries clearly. If you're having an internal (vaginal) scan and are allergic to latex, it's important to let the sonographer or doctor carrying out the scan know this so they can use a latex-free probe cover. If you are using a tampon, this will need to be removed before a vaginal scan.

## How long does it generally take?

An ultrasound scan takes around 15-20 minutes. It will be carried out in the ultrasound department or in the consulting rooms of the clinic.

## Can I bring a friend with me?

Yes, you can bring a friend or relative with you.

## Summary:

1. An ultrasound scan is an investigation to create an image on a screen of the organ or body part being examined using sound waves.
2. An ultrasound scan is used to help in making a diagnosis so that appropriate treatment can be offered.
3. An external ultrasound scan is most often used to examine your unborn baby (after 10 weeks of pregnancy) or when an internal scan cannot be performed to examine the pelvic organs.
4. Ultrasound has an excellent safety record - it has been used in pregnancy for over five decades with no proven harmful effects.
5. Ultrasound scans are generally painless and take around 15-20 minutes.

## Will I feel pain?

Ultrasound scans are generally painless, although you may experience some discomfort as the probe is pressed over your skin or inserted into your body.

## Are there any risks or side effects with ultrasound scans?

There are no known risks from the sound waves used in an ultrasound scan with regulated settings of the ultrasound machine. Ultrasound scans do not involve exposure to Xrays or radiation. Both external and internal ultrasound scans don't have any side effects. In case of early pregnancy scans, the vaginal scan does not induce bleeding or cause a miscarriage. As a precaution against possible infections, before each examination the ultrasound probes are cleaned with recommended cleaning wipes.

## Are there any risks to using ultrasound or doppler ultrasound in pregnancy?

Ultrasound has an excellent safety record. It has been used in pregnancy for over five decades with no proven harmful effects and has many benefits both for the woman and the clinicians caring for her.

In pregnancies up to 10+0 weeks Doppler (pulsed wave and colour) is used only very briefly, if required at all. After 10+0 weeks Doppler is safe but is only to be used when clinically indicated, for example to look at the developing heart or to look at blood flow in the baby. All scans that we provide adhere to the ALARA principle (As Low As Reasonably Achievable) by reducing the thermal index and exposure time, whilst still obtaining all the diagnostic imaging that is required to provide the highest standard of care for your pregnancy.

## What happens after the scan?

The person performing the scan will usually inform you of the findings or arrange for you to see your doctor. If your scan is performed by a sonographer, if appropriate, they will tell you if any abnormality is detected. You will be given a report immediately or the report will be emailed to you. For pregnancy scans, you will be given a copy of the images of your baby. Your consultant will explain the scan findings, make a diagnosis and then discuss further investigations and treatment options.

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