

Pregnancy Ultrasound Scan



A Patient Information Leaflet

What is it?

This is an abdominal ultrasound scan, performed by your GP, to assess the well being of your baby during pregnancy.

How long does it take?

The scan is normally part of a routine antenatal consultation, which lasts around 15 minutes.

What to expect?

The procedure is the same as other ultrasound scans performed in hospital, although it may be somewhat quicker. You will be asked to lie down, expose your abdomen, and then some ultrasound gel will be applied (this can feel a little cold). The doctor will then press gently on your abdomen with a smooth probe to get a picture of your baby.

When is it done?

Scanning can be done after 10 weeks of pregnancy. Before this time the baby may be too small to see on an abdominal scan. If a scan is felt to be necessary before 10 weeks you may be referred to a maternity hospital for a possible internal scan.

What does the scan show?

The scan checks a number of markers of growth and well being depending on the stage of pregnancy. These include:

- identifying the foetal heart beat
- checking the fluid around the baby (called liquor)
- checking the position of the baby
- measuring the head and/or abdominal sizes

What does it NOT show?

The GP ultrasound scan is not intended to identify the sex of the baby. The detailed scan that is carried out in maternity hospitals after 20 weeks of pregnancy, can normally provide this information however.

Similarly the GP ultrasound scan is not intended to identify specific signs of congenital abnormality. A more detailed type of scan, known as a Nuchal Fold Scan or Congenital Anomaly Scan, is required for this type of information. If you are concerned about this you should ask your GP for further information on the availability of such scans.

Frequently Asked Questions

The due-date calculated by my scan is different from the due-date I had been told previously. What does this mean?

It can be difficult to estimate the due date of pregnancy. The most accurate way to do so is a detailed ultrasound scan, known as a “dating scan”, ideally performed by a specialist at around 12 weeks of pregnancy. This may differ from the due-date that has been calculated by the timing of your cycle, particularly if your cycles have been irregular, or if you have recently been using the pill. Later on in pregnancy the due-date shown on the scan will often differ from the date calculated at the dating scan. This however will not change your expected date of delivery. Your doctor will explain if there is any confusion.

I had a scan done and the fetal heart could not be identified. What does this mean?

This can cause parents significant distress however this can happen for a number of reasons. Commonly this can occur if the pregnancy is in fact less than 10 weeks old, as before this time the foetal heart is often just too small to identify. In other occasions it can be a sign of a pregnancy that is in difficulty. Your doctor will explain the situation, and often arrange another scan either in the practice or in the maternity hospital to clarify the situation.

Is it safe?

Ultrasound has been used in pregnancy for over 50 years and is felt to be safe. It uses only sound waves, and no radiation is used.

Is it necessary?

The scan checks a number of markers of growth and well being depending on the stage of pregnancy. Traditionally these markers of foetal well-being are assessed by:

- listening for the heartbeat with a foetal doppler
- pressing on the mother's abdomen to feel for the baby's head
- placing a measuring tape on the mother's abdomen to estimate the growth of the baby

The scan is intended to give much clearer information about these standard markers of your baby's growth.

Do I need to prepare for the scan?

Occasionally in early pregnancy scans you will be asked to have a full bladder to get a clear picture. However for most routine scans this will not be necessary.

This information leaflet offers summarised information only.
For more detailed information consult your doctor.



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