

Fact Sheet

What ultrasound tests are needed during pregnancy?

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Having an ultrasound during pregnancy is usually an exciting time as this is your first chance to meet your baby.

Scans are done to check the health of your baby and of the placenta (the 'afterbirth' which feeds the baby). The sonographer will also count how many babies are present (looking for twins or triplets) and tell us how far along in your pregnancy you are.

When are scans done?

The first trimester scan

A scan done during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy:

- is not essential but can be helpful if you are unsure of your last period, or fell pregnant while on the pill. It is an accurate way of telling when your baby is due.
- may be reassuring if you have suffered a miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy in the past.
- if done at 11 or 12 weeks the scan can be combined with a Nuchal translucency scan (NT scan) which is a screening test for chromosome abnormalities like Down's syndrome.

[see fact sheet on NT scanning and NIPT for chromosome problems in pregnancy]



Facial profile at 12 -14 weeks

Att: By X.Campagnion (cropped by Hidro) (Image créée lors de mon travail.) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

The second trimester (at 18 - 19 weeks)

This is a routine scan which is recommended for all pregnant women to:

- check for abnormalities (problems) with your baby
- check how well the placenta is working and where it is positioned in the uterus
- check how much fluid is around the baby

It is usually possible to tell the sex of the baby (whether you have a boy or a girl) during this scan. Please tell the sonographer if you want to know. (For more information read our fact sheet on mid-trimester scans)

The third trimester (last third of pregnancy)

Scans done at this time of pregnancy will be requested by your doctor or midwife. These scans check the health and growth (weight and size) of your baby as well as how well the placenta is working.

It is important to understand that ultrasound testing is not perfect and cannot find every possible problem or abnormality. Some conditions, like cerebral palsy, are not seen on ultrasound. The ultrasound test is only a 'screening' test, which means that other tests like amniocentesis or chorionic villous sampling (CVS) may be needed for a more accurate assessment of your baby.

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How does ultrasound work?

Ultrasound pictures are made using high frequency (fast moving) sound waves. These sound waves bounce off the baby, uterus and placenta and help us create 2D, or sometimes 3D, pictures of your baby. Bone looks white on scan while fluid looks dark, softer structures like the heart look grey.

Ultrasound scans have been used to check pregnancies for over 30 years so we know that the test is safe for you and your baby.

What do I need to prepare for my ultrasound test?

You will be asked to come to your appointment with a moderately full bladder (you should not feel uncomfortably full). Please wear loose clothing so that your tummy (abdomen) can be easily scanned. For third trimester scans you do not need to have a full bladder.

Please bring previous ultrasound scan results with you to the appointment.

How is the scan done?

Your ultrasound test will usually take about 30 minutes. You will be asked to lie on the examination bed, slightly on your one side with your abdomen (tummy) exposed, and then a warm, clear gel will be applied. The ultrasound transducer (a flat smooth probe) is gently run over your skin and pictures and measurements of the baby are taken.

Sometimes the position of your baby (the way he, or she, is lying) makes it difficult to see the baby clearly or to check the position of the placenta. If this happens you may be asked to come back on another day or to have a transvaginal scan done. With a transvaginal ultrasound, a small ultrasound probe is placed in the vagina to get clearer pictures. This procedure is not painful for you and is not dangerous for your baby.

What happens after my scan?

After your scan you do not need to do anything differently or restrict your activities.

The majority of scans are reported as normal but if the scan shows an abnormality or problem with your pregnancy you will be advised on further tests, or repeat ultrasounds, that are required. You will be given the opportunity to ask questions and information will be provided on further testing if it has been advised.



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