

WASHINGTON OB/GYN ASSOCIATES

95 Leonard Avenue
Building #1, Suite 300
Washington, PA 15301
724-225-3640 Phone

McMURRAY OB/GYN ASSOCIATES

2001 Waterdam Plaza
Suite 201
McMurray, PA 15317
724-942-5420 Phone

WASHINGTON OB/GYN ASSOCIATES

WAYNESBURG
343 East Roy Furman Highway
Suite 104
Waynesburg, PA 15370
724-627-7928 Phone

WASHINGTON OB/GYN ASSOCIATES

MON VALLEY-CHARLEROI
1200 McKean Avenue
Charleroi, PA 15022
724-483-1340 Phone

www.WashingtonObGyn.net

What is ultrasound scanning?

Ultrasound scanning is a procedure that uses high-frequency sound waves and their echoes to create video pictures of organs in the body. It is a very safe test that will not hurt you or the baby.

When is it used in pregnancy?

Your healthcare provider uses ultrasound scanning to examine your unborn baby. He or she also uses it to look at your uterus, amniotic sac, placenta, and ovaries.

Many pregnant women have one or more ultrasound scans as part of their routine prenatal care. You may also have ultrasound scans if your healthcare provider thinks there may be a problem with the pregnancy or if you have risk factors that could lead to problems for the baby. Ultrasound scanning is very helpful for many abnormal conditions.

Some of the reasons ultrasound scanning may be done during pregnancy are to:

- Make sure the baby is developing in the uterus and not in a fallopian tube (ectopic pregnancy).
- See how far along you are in your pregnancy.
- Check the age, size, weight, and position of the baby.
- See if the placenta is normal and attached properly.
- Check for any problems with the uterus.
- See if the baby's body has any major problems.
- Check the amount of fluid around the baby inside the uterus.
- Check for more than 1 baby.
- Check the baby's heart.
- Look for movement by the baby and breathing movements of the baby's chest.
- Help with an amniocentesis or other tests or procedures.
- Check the baby for signs of stress as part of a biophysical profile.
- Check into the cause of vaginal bleeding or pelvic pain.



An ultrasound scan may be done for different reasons at different stages in the pregnancy. For example, tests to see if the baby is growing at a normal rate are most accurate during the second trimester of pregnancy. To check the age of the baby or check for more than 1 baby, an ultrasound is often done between the 16th and 20th weeks.

Sometimes a baby's gender may be learned by looking for the genitals in an ultrasound scan after the 16th week of pregnancy. However, this is not usually a reason for doing an ultrasound.

How do I prepare for ultrasound scanning?

If your bladder is full, it may be easier for your healthcare provider to see the baby and other organs. For this reason your provider may ask you to drink up to 6 glasses of water 1 hour before the test and then not to urinate until after the test. Your provider will tell you if this or other preparations are needed.

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What happens during the procedure?

The ultrasound scan may be done at your provider's office, at a clinic or hospital, or at a radiation center.

A small device called a transducer is used to do the scan. The transducer acts like a microphone. During the scan, high-frequency sound waves enter your body through the transducer. The transducer is connected to a computer. As the sound waves pass through your body, they are reflected back to the transducer by the organs. The computer analyzes these echoes and produces images of the organs on a screen.

The ultrasound exam may be done by putting the transducer on the surface of your abdomen. First your provider or the ultrasound technologist will put an oil or gel on the skin of your abdomen. This helps the transducer glide smoothly over your skin and improves its contact with your body. Your provider will move the transducer over different parts of your abdomen to get pictures of the baby and the uterus.

Some ultrasound exams, especially early in pregnancy, are done through the vagina. For these scans the transducer is shaped like a narrow tube and covered with a condomlike sheath. It is inserted gently into the vagina.

An ultrasound scan takes about 15 to 30 minutes. You can watch the images of your baby on the screen.

What happens after the procedure?

Usually you can go home and go back to your normal activities as soon as the scan is done. You may be able to have the results within a few minutes to a few days later.

What are the benefits of this procedure?

Ultrasound scans can improve a baby's chances of health and survival by:

- detecting possible problems that might be corrected before the baby is born
- providing more accurate information about the baby's health before birth
- preventing premature birth with a more accurate determination of the due date.

There are no known side effects from ultrasound scanning. In addition, no medicines are known to interfere with test results. Ultrasound scanning is fast and painless. It does not use radiation and avoids possible hazards of some other tests used for diagnosis, such as bleeding, infection, or reactions to chemicals.

What are the risks of this procedure?

There are no known risks associated with ultrasound scanning because the sound waves used are not dangerous. However, if it is necessary to use anesthesia or to insert a medical instrument into the body to conduct the ultrasound, there may be a slight risk associated with the procedure.

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When should I call my healthcare provider?

Call your provider during office hours if:

- You have questions about the procedure or its result.
- You want to make another appointment.

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