

Ultrasound: Obstetrical Exam

How to prepare and what to expect

This handout explains how to prepare for an obstetrical ultrasound exam, how it works, how it is done, what to expect, and how to get your results.

What is an obstetrical ultrasound?

Ultrasound exams use sound waves to create images of the inside of the body. Obstetrical (OB) ultrasound checks the health of a pregnant woman and her unborn baby. Ultrasound does not use X-rays.

How does the exam work?

A *sonographer* (ultrasound technologist) will use a hand-held device that sends and receives sound waves. This device is called a *transducer*.

First, gel will be applied to your skin to help the transducer make contact. The sonographer will then press the transducer against your skin. As the sound waves bounce off your body's fluids and tissues, images are created. These images will appear on a computer monitor for your radiologist to see. In an OB ultrasound, the images show both the mother's and the baby's tissues.

How should I prepare?

- Wear a loose-fitting, 2-piece outfit for the exam. Only your abdomen needs to be exposed during the exam.
- If an ultrasound is done before 18 weeks of pregnancy, you need to have a full bladder for the exam. A full bladder helps your doctor see your baby more easily. Drink 1 quart (4 cups) of water 1 hour before the exam so your bladder will be full.
- If it is very early in your pregnancy (less than 10 weeks), the sonographer or radiologist may also choose to do a *transvaginal* ultrasound.



The sonographer will move a hand-held device called a transducer over your abdomen during your exam.

In a transvaginal ultrasound, a small transducer is placed inside the vagina. This lets the sonographer and doctor see the fetus more clearly.

How is the exam done?

- You will lie on an exam table. The sonographer will move your clothing away from your lower abdominal area.
- The sonographer will apply warm gel to your abdomen. This helps the transducer make contact with your skin.
- The sonographer will then press the transducer against your skin and move it over your abdomen.
- If needed, the radiologist may take more images after the sonographer is done.

What will I feel during the exam?

- There is little or no discomfort with obstetrical ultrasound.
- You will feel the sonographer apply warm gel to your abdomen and move the transducer over your abdomen.
- You may be asked to roll on your side, or change positions.
- The exam usually takes less than 1 hour for a single baby. It can take up to 2 to 3 hours for twins and triplets.

Who interprets the results of the exam and how do I get them?

A radiologist or *perinatologist* (a doctor who cares for a pregnant woman and her unborn child) who specializes in ultrasound will review the images and send a report to your referring doctor. You will receive your results from the doctor who ordered the test. The radiologist may also talk with you about early findings when your exam is over.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

- UWMC Imaging Services:
206.598.6200
- UW Roosevelt Imaging
Services: 206.598.6868
- Harborview Imaging
Services: 206.744.3105