

Patient information

Ultrasound

What is an ultrasound scan?

An ultrasound scan builds up a picture of part of the inside of the body using sound waves that cannot be detected by a human ear. A small, hand-held sensor is pressed carefully against the skin surface above the area to be viewed. The sensor both generates sound waves and detects them as they are reflected back off the surfaces and tissue boundaries of internal organs. The sensor can be moved over the skin to view the organ from different angles. The pictures generated are displayed on a TV monitor screen and recorded for subsequent study.

Ultrasound images are often used in conjunction with other diagnostic tests and are widely used for many different parts of the body. They can also be used to study blood flow and to detect any narrowing or blockage of blood vessels, for example, in the neck.

Who will I see?

Your examination will be undertaken by a sonographer who is trained to produce high quality ultrasound images or occasionally a consultant radiologist for specialist ultrasound examinations. In some circumstances the sonographer may also have a radiography Assistant working with them, who will help you during and after the examination and answer any of your questions.

Are there any risks?

No, there are no known risks, so it is considered to be a very safe examination.

Am I required to make any special preparations?

Often it is necessary to prepare for the scan. For example, if your pelvis, kidney or bladder is to be scanned, you may be asked to drink fluids to make sure that your bladder is full before the examination can begin.

For some examinations, such as gall bladder and pancreas, you may be asked to fast for a specified number of hours. If so, this will be explained in the accompanying appointment letter.

Some female pelvic examinations will involve a trans-vaginal scan using a special probe which will be protected by a probe cover. In some circumstances this scan can provide the sonographer with more detailed information. You will always be asked whether you consent to this examination by the sonographer.

You should also tell the centre in advance if you have had a similar ultrasound scan or any other diagnostic scans recently.

Can I bring a relative/friend?

Yes, you may be accompanied, but please be aware that the sonographer may ask you some personal questions as part of the ultrasound examination.

When you arrive

Please go to the reception desk in the centre. You will be shown where to wait until collected by a sonographer or other member of staff. Within the centre the toilets are clearly signposted should you need to use them at any time, however you may have been asked to attend with a full bladder, in which case please wait until after the scan. If you are experiencing difficulties with this, please inform the receptionist.

Upon collection

You may be shown to a private cubicle where you may be asked to remove various items of clothing and to put on an examination gown. You should place your clothes and personal belongings either in a basket which you will keep with you or in a secure locker if provided by the centre.

What happens during the ultrasound scan?

The sonographer will answer any questions you may have about your ultrasound scan and then ask you to consent to undertaking the examination.

The sonographer may not talk with you whilst undertaking the scan as they will be concentrating on obtaining the best quality images that are possible. They will be happy to discuss any questions that you may have at the end of the examination.

You will be asked some questions about your health, in particular your current symptoms. You will be invited to lie down on a couch. The lights in the room may be dimmed so that the pictures on the VDU can be seen more clearly.

A gel will be applied to your skin over the area to be scanned, for example the abdomen. The gel allows the sensor to slide easily over the skin and helps to produce clearer pictures. The lubricating gel used is washable and hypoallergenic. You may be asked to assume various body positions as the examination is performed. There is help for those who find this difficult. You may be asked to take deep breaths and to hold your breath for a few moments.

The sonographer sits or stands beside you, slowly moving the sensor over your skin while viewing the images on the screen. Records of selected images will be made so that they can be viewed later. Upon completion, the gel will be wiped off and you will be free to get dressed.

Will it be uncomfortable?

Ultrasound itself does not produce discomfort and apart from the sensor on your skin, you will not feel anything. However, if a full bladder is required, you may experience some associated discomfort. Ultrasound is often carried out to try and find out the reason why a patient has severe abdominal or pelvic pain. In these circumstances, some pressure may be applied to the skin surface over an inflamed organ, for example, the gallbladder, to check what is causing the pain. This may increase the amount of pain coming from that organ temporarily.

How long will it take?

The examination should take no longer than 20 minutes.

Are there any side effects?

No. You can drive home afterwards and return to work straight away.

Can I eat and drink afterwards?

Yes, do so normally.

When will I get the results?

The ultrasound images will be examined and a report of the findings prepared. This normally will take less than two days to reach your referring doctor, however please allow at 7 – 10 days before you contact your doctor to allow them time to review the report.

If you have a query

If you have a query about having the ultrasound scan, please call the centre during normal business hours.

Can I leave feedback on my experience?

Yes, please complete a patient experience survey when you have finished your examination.

Appointment reminder message

A large number of appointments are wasted every year, where patients either forget the date and time of their visit or simply do not inform the centre that they are unable to attend as originally expected. If you or your referring clinician have supplied Care UK with a mobile telephone number, we will send you an SMS reminder message 24 hours before your scheduled appointment. This message will remind you about your appointment and will ask you to contact the centre if you are not expecting to attend as originally planned. Please notify your Care UK diagnostic centre if you wish to opt out of receiving this reminder message.