

Obstetrical Ultrasound

How to prepare for your exam

What is obstetrical (OB) ultrasound imaging?

Ultrasound imaging is used to take pictures of internal organs by sending and receiving sound waves into the body. The sound waves are recorded and displayed on a screen. OB ultrasound is the special use of sound waves to check the health of a pregnant woman and her unborn baby. X-rays are not used in ultrasound.

How does the exam work?

Ultrasound sends sound waves into the body using a transducer, a hand-held device that sends and receives sound waves. After gel is applied to the skin, the sonographer (ultrasound technologist) will press the transducer against the skin. The sound waves echo (return) from the fluids and tissues inside the body, including from the unborn baby, forming a picture on a screen. During an OB ultrasound, this picture shows both the mother's and the baby's tissues in real-time.

How should I prepare for an OB ultrasound?

- If an ultrasound is done before 18 weeks of pregnancy, you need to have a full bladder for the exam. Your full bladder will allow for a better view of the baby and its organs. You should drink a quart (32 oz) of water 1 hour before the examination so that your bladder is full. After 18 weeks, a full bladder may not be necessary.
- The sonographer or radiologist may need to obtain more pictures with a transvaginal ultrasound (a small, special transducer placed into the vagina), in addition to the abdominal approach. If your bladder is full for the transabdominal ultrasound, you will need to empty your bladder for this portion of the exam. Transvaginal ultrasound is often done in early pregnancy to better see the unborn baby; it is used in later pregnancy to better look at the placenta or cervix.
- You should wear a loose-fitting, 2-piece outfit for the exam. Only the lower abdominal area needs to be exposed during the exam.

How is the exam done?

- You will lie on an exam table and clothing will be moved away from the lower abdominal area.



- Warm gel is applied to the abdomen to make contact between your skin and the transducer.
- The sonographer then presses the device against your skin and sweeps it over the abdomen to obtain pictures.
- The sonographer will show the pictures to the radiologist. The radiologist may request more pictures to complete your exam.

What will I feel during the OB ultrasound exam?

- Ultrasound of the abdomen is fast, painless, and easy. There is little or no discomfort with the procedure.
- You will feel the sonographer apply warm gel to your abdomen and press the transducer against your skin. The transducer will be moved over your skin until all of the pictures are taken.
- Your sonographer will let you know if you need to have a transvaginal ultrasound in addition to the transabdominal ultrasound. A transvaginal ultrasound is usually more comfortable than a manual pelvic exam.
- You may be asked to roll on either side or to change positions to better see the unborn baby.
- In early pregnancy, this examination usually takes less than 1 hour for a single baby. Later in pregnancy or with twins (or triplets), this can take 2 to 3 hours.

Who interprets the results and how do I get them?

The radiologist (a medical doctor specializing in diagnostic imaging, including ultrasound) will review the pictures and send the report directly to your doctor. You will receive your examination results from the doctor who ordered the test. In some cases, the radiologist may discuss findings with you at the end of your exam.