Having a Mid-pregnancy Ultrasound Scan?

Offered as part of the NHS Fetal Anomaly Screening Programme

This booklet gives you some information about the purpose of the ultrasound scan in mid-pregnancy, so you can decide whether to have this examination or not.

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What is the purpose of a mid-pregnancy ultrasound scan?
This section includes our reasons for offering a mid-pregnancy scan and what a scan can tell you about your baby's health and development.

Having a scan
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Scan results and findings
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What is the purpose of a mid-pregnancy ultrasound scan?

Why am I offered a mid-pregnancy scan?
A mid-pregnancy scan forms part of the antenatal screening programme that is offered to all pregnant women. It usually takes place at 18-20 weeks and the main purpose of this scan is to look for abnormalities.

What kind of scan will I be offered?
You will be offered a scan that produces a two-dimensional (2-D) black and white image. The 3-D and colour scan images we sometimes see on television and in magazines are not made by ordinary scan machines, and are not used in the NHS screening programme.

Is the mid-pregnancy scan safe?
As far as we know, the scan we offer is safe for mother and baby.

Does everybody have a scan?
We offer the scan to everybody, but you do not have to have it if you do not want to. Before making up your mind, there are a few things you do need to know, so please read this booklet carefully.

Giving consent for the scan.
Remember that this is a clinical examination and you will be asked to give consent before it
is carried out. Make sure you understand what is going to happen - feel free to ask any questions.

**What can a scan tell me about my baby's health and development?**
Before deciding about a scan, you need to know something about what scans can and can not tell you.

During the scan, we take a very careful look at your baby from head to toe. Usually we learn that the baby appears to be healthy and is developing well. Sometimes, though, we find a problem. Some problems are quite common, others very rare. A few are serious, but most are minor, and they will be explained in detail to you.

The scan is a happy experience for most people, but not for everybody.

Scans have their limitations. Sometimes we have to say there might be a problem, but we can not say for certain. In a small number of cases, babies are born with abnormalities, even though no problem was identified by the scan.

The rest of this booklet tells you what it's like to have a scan and what happens if any kind of problem, or possible problem, is found.

Remember, that for most people, their scan is a happy experience. Unfortunately though, that is not true for everybody, which is why we ask you to read the booklet carefully, and then make a decision about whether you want a scan or not. We will respect your choice.
Having a scan

Can I bring family or friends with me when I have the scan? Hospitals have different policies about this, and it is a good idea to check beforehand, but most hospitals welcome partners into the room. Young children may not be allowed in while the procedure is being performed, because they can cause distraction.

An ultrasound scan is an important clinical examination.

Remember, ultrasound is an important clinical examination and is treated the same way as any other hospital investigation.

Do I need to drink water before my scan? Yes – but your bladder should not be so full that you are uncomfortable. Your baby will be in a slightly higher position when there is some fluid in your bladder, as the sonographer gets a better view that way.

What will happen when I go into the scan room? Most scans are carried out by specially trained staff called sonographers. In order for the sonographer to get good images of your baby, the procedure is carried out in a dimly lit room. Scanning requires a lot of concentration, especially if your baby is very active; it is for this reason that scanning is performed in a quiet, dark room.

You will first be asked to lie on a couch. Then you will be asked to raise your upper garments to your chest and
lower your skirt or trousers to your hips. Tissue paper will be tucked around your clothing to protect it from the ultrasound gel, which will then be applied to your abdomen. The sonographer then passes a hand held device called a probe over your skin, and it is this probe which sends and picks up the ultrasound waves.

Ultrasound waves do not travel well through the air, so we use the gel to make sure there is good contact between the probe and your skin.

The sonographer performs the scan in a systematic way, carefully examining each part of your baby's body. Having the scan does not hurt, but occasionally the sonographer may need to apply slight pressure if there is difficulty in checking some of the anatomy.

During the examination, sonographers need to keep the screen in a position that gives them a good view, either directly facing them or at an angle, but they will show you the baby once the scan has been completed.
How long will my scan take?
A scan can take anything from 10 - 40 minutes. The images created on the screen are usually recognisable, for example, the head, heart and limbs. However, the sonographer may be prevented from getting good pictures if your baby is lying in an awkward position, or is moving around a lot. If you are overweight, this can reduce the quality of the scan image, because there is more tissue for the ultrasound beam to get through before it reaches the baby. If it is difficult to get a good image, scanning may take longer, or have to be repeated at another time.

Scan results and findings

If everything appears normal, what happens next? The vast majority of scans show that the baby is developing normally, and no problems are found. This is because most babies are healthy and do not have abnormalities.

Will the sonographer tell me the sex of my baby? This depends on the policy of your hospital. Some hospitals have a policy of not revealing the sex of your baby. In others, you can be given the information if - and only if - the sonographer can get a good view. Even then, the information can turn out to be wrong. If your baby is lying in an awkward position, it may be impossible to tell.
Can I have a picture of my baby?
You will need to check if your hospital provides this service. If they do, there may be a charge.

Will I need another scan?
If everything appears normal, you will probably not need another scan in this pregnancy.

If the sonographer does not see everything clearly, perhaps because you are overweight or your baby is lying in an unhelpful position, the scan may need to be repeated on a different day. This happens quite often and doesn't mean the sonographer has seen anything to worry about.

If everything appears normal, you will probably not need another scan in this pregnancy.

Can the scan detect all problems?
Not always, no. To begin with, a number of things can affect how good a view the sonographer can get. These include the position and age of your baby, the amount of fluid ("waters") surrounding your baby, your own bodyweight, and scar tissue left by any abdominal operations, such as a previous Caesarean section. Also, some problems only develop after 18 - 20 weeks, and some can never be seen on a scan because they have no effect on the appearance of the baby. This means that in a small number of cases, babies are born with abnormalities, even though no problem was identified by the scan.