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## Pregnancy tests - ultrasound

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## Summary

- Ultrasound is used during pregnancy to check the baby's development, the presence of a multiple pregnancy and to help pick up any abnormalities.
- The ultrasound scan isn't 100 per cent accurate, but the advantages of the test are that it's non-invasive, painless and safe for both mother and unborn baby.
- If fetal abnormalities are detected, you may be offered further tests to confirm the diagnosis, such as amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling.

Ultrasound is a scan that uses high frequency sound waves to study internal body structures. The sound waves are emitted from a vibrating crystal in a handheld scanner. The reflected sound waves or 'echoes' are then translated into a grainy, two-dimensional (or sometimes three-dimensional) image on a monitor.

Ultrasound is used during pregnancy to check the baby's development and to help pick up any abnormalities such as Down syndrome. Since the procedure can't produce high quality images, any suspected abnormalities need to be confirmed with other tests. The ultrasound scan isn't 100 per cent accurate, but the advantages of the test are that it's non-invasive, painless and safe for both mother and unborn baby.

## Uses of the ultrasound

Ultrasound may be used at various points during pregnancy, including:

- **First trimester** - ultrasound performed within the first three months of pregnancy is used to check that the embryo is developing inside the womb (rather than inside a fallopian tube, for example), confirm the number of embryos, and calculate the gestational age and the baby's due date.
- **Second trimester** - ultrasound performed between weeks 18 and 20 is used to check the development of fetal structures such as the spine, limbs, brain and internal organs. The size and location of the placenta is also checked. The baby's sex can be established, if the parents wish to know.
- **Third trimester** - ultrasound performed after 30 weeks is used to check that the baby is continuing to grow at a normal rate. The location of the placenta is checked to make sure it isn't blocking the cervix.

## Medical issues to consider

Ultrasound is a safe, painless and non-invasive procedure. Many parents consider the ultrasound as an opportunity to see their unborn child, and perhaps discover its sex. However, you should remember that the ultrasound is a diagnostic procedure and, in some cases, it may suggest that a fetus has an abnormality. Further tests are usually needed to confirm the diagnosis.

## Ultrasound procedure

The procedure depends on the type of ultrasound used, but may include:

- **Transabdominal ultrasound** - sound waves pass very well through water. The sonographer uses your full bladder as a 'porthole' to your uterus, so you will have to drink plenty of water before the test. You lie down on an examination table or bed. Gel is applied to your abdomen (to provide better contact between your skin and the scanner) and the sonographer moves the scanner in various positions. Pictures are sent instantly to a nearby monitor. The sonographer may have to push quite firmly at times in order to see the deeper structures. The scan usually takes about 30 minutes.
- **Vaginal ultrasound** - in some cases, a transabdominal ultrasound can't produce clear enough pictures. There may be too much air in your bowel, for instance, and air is a poor conductor of sound waves. In these cases, a slender scanner is inserted into your vagina. The scan usually takes about 30 minutes.

## Immediately after the ultrasound

Once the ultrasound is finished, you are given tissues to wipe away the gel, and you can go to the toilet. The report is sent to your doctor, so you will have to make an appointment to get the result.

## Possible complications

There are no known risks, complications or side effects for either the mother or her unborn baby.

## Taking care of yourself at home

An ultrasound scan is safe, painless and non-invasive, so there is no need to take any special precautions afterward. You are free to go about your normal business.

## Long term outlook

What happens next depends on the results of your ultrasound. Note that a normal result doesn't guarantee that your baby is normal, because some abnormalities cannot be found using this test. If fetal abnormalities were detected, you may need further tests to confirm the diagnosis. These tests, including amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling, are optional. Discuss the benefits, risks and complications of these tests with your doctor before deciding whether or not to go ahead.

## Other types of pregnancy tests

Other types of pregnancy tests you may be offered could include:

- **Amniocentesis** - a small amount of amniotic fluid is taken using a slender needle inserted through the abdomen. The needle is guided with the help of ultrasound.

The fluid sample contains cells, which are then examined in a laboratory for chromosomal abnormalities. The risk of miscarriage following amniocentesis is around one in 250.

- **Chorionic villus sampling** - a slender needle is inserted through the abdomen or cervix to take a small sample of placenta. The needle is guided with the help of ultrasound. The chorionic villi are then tested in the laboratory for chromosomal abnormalities. The risk of miscarriage following chorionic villus sampling is one in 100.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor

### [References](#)

- [Ultrasound scan](#) (2004) [online], Better Health Channel, Department of Health, State Government of Victoria, Australia.

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#### Pregnancy and birth basics

- [Childbirth - pain relief options](#)  
[Understanding your pain relief options can help you cope better with the pain of childbirth...](#)
- [Pregnancy – labour](#)  
[Labour is divided into three stages. The first stage is dilation of the cervix from 0 to 10 cm, the second stage is birth of the baby, and the third stage is delivery of the placenta. Labour typically...](#)
- [Pregnancy - premature labour](#)  
[Sometimes, babies arrive early. It's important to recognise premature labour, in case you and your baby need medical care...](#)
- [Contraception after giving birth](#)  
[After having a baby, you need to choose an effective method of contraception if you don't want to have another baby straight away...](#)
- [If you want to get pregnant, timing is everything](#)  
[If you are trying for a baby, to increase your chances of conceiving, it helps to know when you are at your most fertile, and when is the best time to have sex...](#)
- [Pregnancy testing](#)  
[Sometimes, a home pregnancy test may be positive when a woman isn't pregnant...](#)
- [Folate for pregnant women](#)  
[Even women who aren't planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake in case of unplanned pregnancy...](#)
- [Pregnancy - unplanned](#)  
[When a woman does not want to become a parent, her pregnancy options may include abortion or adoption...](#)
- [Contraception - emergency contraception](#)  
[It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours \(four days\)...](#)

#### Stages of pregnancy

- [Baby due date](#)  
[Pregnancy is calculated from the first day of your last period, not from the date of conception...](#)
- [Pregnancy - week by week](#)

[Pregnancy is counted as 40 weeks, starting from the first day of the mother's last menstrual period...](#)

- [Pregnancy - signs and symptoms](#)

[All women experience pregnancy differently, and you will experience different symptoms at different stages of your pregnancy...](#)

- [Planning for labour and birth](#)

[Some of the signs and symptoms of going into labour may include period-like cramps, backache, diarrhoea and contractions...](#)

- [Conceiving a baby](#)

[The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation \(the release of the egg from the ovary\) are approximately one in five every month. Around nine...](#)

- [Pregnancy stages and changes](#)

[It's helpful to have an idea of how your body may react to the different stages of pregnancy. It also helps to know how pregnancy may affect your emotions and feelings...](#)

## **Fertility issues and options**

- [Adoption](#)

[Adoption can give a secure family life to children who can't live with their birth family...](#)

- [Surrogacy](#)

[Surrogacy is a form of assisted reproductive treatment \(ART\) in which a woman carries a child within her uterus on behalf of another person or couple...](#)

- [If you want to get pregnant, timing is everything](#)

[If you are trying for a baby, to increase your chances of conceiving, it helps to know when you are at your most fertile, and when is the best time to have sex...](#)

- [Abortion](#)

[All women should have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions...](#)

- [Age and fertility](#)

[Age affects the fertility of both men and women, and is the single biggest factor affecting a woman's chance to conceive and have a healthy baby...](#)

- [Infertility in men](#)

[A couple isn't suspected of fertility problems until they have tried and failed to conceive for one year...](#)

- [Infertility in women](#)

[The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation are approximately one in five every month...](#)

- [Weight, fertility and pregnancy health](#)

[Compared with women in the healthy weight range, women who are carrying extra weight are less likely to conceive...](#)

## **Keeping healthy during pregnancy**

- [Pregnancy - morning sickness](#)

[Morning sickness is typically at its worst early in the day but it can strike at any point during the day or night...](#)

- [Healthy eating during pregnancy - tucker talk tips](#)

[Some foods should be avoided during pregnancy as they carry bacteria that could harm your unborn baby...](#)

- [Postnatal exercise](#)

[Always consult with your doctor or midwife before starting any postnatal exercise program...](#)

- [Pregnancy and your mental health](#)

[Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn't stop when the baby...](#)

- [Pregnancy and teeth](#)

[It's important to look after your teeth and gums when you're pregnant, as gum disease can affect your baby...](#)

- [Tests, scans and checks - pregnancy and labour](#)

[Tests can confirm your pregnancy and also monitor your baby's development in the womb...](#)

- [Alcohol and pregnancy](#)  
[There's no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. It's safest to not drink at all during pregnancy, when trying to conceive, and while breastfeeding...](#)
- [Pregnancy and smoking](#)  
[Smoking while pregnant exposes a woman and her unborn child to an increased risk of health problems...](#)
- [Immunisation and pregnancy](#)  
[Immunisation can protect a woman and her unborn baby against many infectious diseases...](#)
- [Folate for pregnant women](#)  
[Even women who aren't planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake in case of unplanned pregnancy...](#)
- [Pregnancy and exercise](#)  
[Unless you have complications, you should be able to exercise throughout your pregnancy...](#)
- [Pelvic floor](#)  
[Pelvic floor exercises are designed to improve muscle tone and prevent the need for corrective surgery...](#)
- [Pregnancy and diet](#)  
[Good nutrition during pregnancy can help to keep you and your developing baby healthy...](#)
- [Pregnancy and travel](#)  
[Travelling to developing nations is not encouraged during pregnancy, due to the risk of disease and the standard of medical facilities...](#)
- [Food poisoning - listeria](#)  
[Listeria infection is uncommon but very dangerous for the elderly, people whose immune systems are not working properly and pregnant women and their unborn babies...](#)

#### **Health concerns during pregnancy**

- [Miscarriage and Stillbirth - Coming to terms \(video\)](#)
- [Pregnancy - bleeding problems](#)  
[Bleeding from the vagina in early pregnancy happens in almost one in four pregnancies...](#)
- [Newborn bloodspot screening \(video\)](#)  
[Every newborn baby in Australia is offered a newborn bloodspot screening test to identify those at risk for rare, but serious, medical conditions including PKU, hypothyroidism and cystic fibrosis...](#)
- [Placenta previa](#)  
[Placenta previa means the placenta has implanted at the bottom of the uterus, over the cervix or close by...](#)
- [Placental abruption](#)  
[Placental abruption means the placenta has detached from the wall of the uterus, starving the baby of oxygen and nutrients...](#)
- [Pregnancy - pre-eclampsia](#)  
[There is no evidence that pre-eclampsia is caused by emotional stress, working too hard or not getting enough rest...](#)
- [Lupus and pregnancy](#)  
[Lupus can be controlled with medications, so the majority of affected women are able to have children...](#)
- [HIV and women – having children](#)  
[Women living with human immunodeficiency virus \(HIV\), or women whose partner is HIV-positive, may wish to have children but feel concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus to themselves \(if...](#)
- [Alcohol and pregnancy](#)  
[There's no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. It's safest to not drink at all during pregnancy, when trying to conceive, and while breastfeeding...](#)
- [Pregnancy and smoking](#)  
[Smoking while pregnant exposes a woman and her unborn child to an increased risk of health problems...](#)
- [Pregnancy - obstetric emergencies](#)  
[An obstetric emergency may arise when a woman is pregnant, or during her delivery. In this case, extra care is needed. A woman may need a lot of tests and](#)

[treatments, and extended hospital stays. She...](#)

- [Postnatal depression \(PND\)](#)

[Postnatal depression can happen either a few days or weeks after the birth, with a slow or sudden onset...](#)

- [Molar pregnancy](#)

[Most molar pregnancies are diagnosed when bleeding early in pregnancy prompts an ultrasound scan...](#)

- [Miscarriage](#)

[A range of feelings is normal after a miscarriage, and they often linger for some time...](#)

- [Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder \(FASD\)](#)

[The World Health Organization recommends that pregnant women should avoid alcohol...](#)

- [Asthma - pregnancy and breastfeeding](#)

[Pregnant women with asthma need to continue to take their asthma medication as it is important to the health of both mother and baby that the mother's asthma is well managed...](#)

- [Pregnancy and diet](#)

[Good nutrition during pregnancy can help to keep you and your developing baby healthy...](#)

- [Birth defects explained](#)

[The cause of birth defects is often unknown, speak to your GP if you are at increased risk of having a baby with a congenital anomaly...](#)

- [Ectopic pregnancy](#)

[Ectopic pregnancy is caused by a fertilised egg not being able to move through the fallopian tube...](#)

- [Diabetes - gestational](#)

[Gestational diabetes is diabetes that occurs during pregnancy and usually disappears when the pregnancy is over...](#)

#### **Preparing for birth**

- [Pregnancy - care choices](#)

[It's very important for you and your baby to be looked after from the start of your pregnancy until after the birth of your baby...](#)

- [Pregnancy – labour](#)

[Labour is divided into three stages. The first stage is dilation of the cervix from 0 to 10 cm, the second stage is birth of the baby, and the third stage is delivery of the placenta. Labour typically...](#)

- [Pregnancy - premature labour](#)

[Sometimes, babies arrive early. It's important to recognise premature labour, in case you and your baby need medical care...](#)

- [Pregnancy - packing for hospital](#)

[Packing for hospital is an exciting part of preparing for the birth of your baby...](#)

- [Planning for labour and birth](#)

[Some of the signs and symptoms of going into labour may include period-like cramps, backache, diarrhoea and contractions...](#)

- [Twins - identical and fraternal](#)

[Multiple births are more common due to the advancing average age of mothers and the rise in assisted reproductive techniques...](#)

#### **Preparing for a newborn**

- [Breastfeeding - the first days](#)

[Let your baby feed as much as they want in the first few days to help establish good breastfeeding patterns...](#)

- [Breastfeeding - when to start](#)

[Breastfeeding within the first hour after birth allows your baby to behave instinctively and breastfeed with little intervention...](#)

- [Alcohol and pregnancy](#)

[There's no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. It's safest to not drink at all during pregnancy, when trying to conceive, and while breastfeeding...](#)

- [Vitamin K and newborn babies](#)

[With low levels of vitamin K, some babies can have severe bleeding into the brain, causing significant brain damage...](#)

- [Postnatal depression \(PND\)](#)

[Postnatal depression can happen either a few days or weeks after the birth, with a slow or sudden onset...](#)

- [Baby furniture - safety tips](#)

[Even if your baby furniture meets every safety standard and recommendation, your child still needs close supervision...](#)

- [Newborn bloodspot screening](#)

[Every newborn baby in Australia is offered a newborn bloodspot screening test to identify those at risk of rare, but serious, medical conditions...](#)

## Related Information

- [Pregnancy - prenatal tests](#)

A range of tests is available to pregnant women to confirm pregnancy and monitor the baby's development in the womb...

- [Pregnancy tests - maternal serum screening](#)

Maternal serum screening can indicate increased risk of abnormalities in the unborn child, but is not a diagnosis...

- [Egg freezing](#)

You can freeze your eggs for medical reasons or for reasons that are more to do with your life circumstances...

- [Newborn bloodspot screening](#)

Every newborn baby in Australia is offered a newborn bloodspot screening test to identify those at risk of rare, but serious, medical conditions...

- [Pregnancy testing](#)

Sometimes, a home pregnancy test may be positive when a woman isn't pregnant...

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