

Informed Consent for Routine Pregnancy Ultrasound

Anatomy Scan Benefits and risks of ultrasound in pregnancy taken from the National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health

Ultrasound is, arguably, the most commonly used diagnostic procedure in obstetrics. It is convenient, painless, yields immediate, extensive results, and is widely considered to be safe.

Some (but not all) benefits described in the literature have been validated by evidence-based analysis, such as pregnancy dating. Others are considered clinically useful, although objective evidence may be less strong.

As is the case with almost any medical procedure, however, its performance carries some risks: misdiagnosis on the one hand and possible undesired effects on the other. The general belief exists that diagnostic ultrasound (DUS) does not pose any risk to the pregnant patient nor to her fetus. Nonetheless, ultrasound is a form of energy and, as such, demonstrates effects in biological tissues it traverses (bioeffects). The physical mechanisms responsible for these effects are thermal or non-thermal (mechanical). It is the role of science to show whether any of these bioeffects may be harmful. A risk-benefit analysis may also be important, as well as education of the end users to assure patients' safety.

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Clients at Birthwise Midwifery Care have the option to get a referral for a 20-week anatomy scan or to decline routine ultrasounds during pregnancy.

Reasons we recommend this routine ultrasound:

- Ultrasounds done by a trained technician may be able to detect anatomical abnormalities in the fetus. These scans look for normal vs abnormal structures in the brain, spine, heart, bladder, bowel, kidneys and bones. While these tests may not be able to detect all abnormalities, it may be able give early warning for babies who have higher risk of complications and may require specialized care. Having this ultrasound done between 18 weeks and 22 weeks of pregnancy is the optimal time for the ultrasonographer to visualize your baby. Done earlier or later may compromise the accuracy of results.
- Ultrasounds done at this time in pregnancy can help determine if there are undiagnosed issues in the pregnant person needing additional attention.
- Placental location can only be determined using ultrasound. If the placenta is located over or near the cervix, it can cause serious complications in labor or birth. Placental abruption (separation of the placenta from the uterine wall) can cause excessive blood loss for both baby and birthing person. Routine ultrasound may not be able to detect all potential problems in pregnancy and birth, but it can be a useful tool to catch some issues in a timely way. Routine ultrasounds are very different from diagnostic ultrasounds. It is possible that during your course of care we discover or suspect problems that require further testing or ultrasounds.

Declining routine screening at this time will not automatically carry over into refusal for further diagnostic testing when clinically indicated. Clients who are still pregnant into their 41st week of pregnancy will require limited ultrasounds to check amniotic fluid levels and well-being of the baby.