

Having an ultrasound scan

This leaflet explains more about having an ultrasound scan, including the benefits, risks and any alternatives. It also provides information on what you can expect when you come to hospital. If you have any further questions, please speak to a health care professional caring for you.

What is an ultrasound scan?

An ultrasound scan uses high-frequency sound waves to create an image of the area of examination. A small handheld probe is placed onto your skin, and moved over the part of the body being examined.

A water base gel is put onto your skin to allow the probe to move smoothly. This is a widely used diagnostic test to examine the organs and soft tissues of the body. The ultrasound is carried out by either a sonographer or radiologist - both are trained professionals in this type of scan.

Why should I have an ultrasound?

An ultrasound scan can give information that leads to, or helps make a diagnosis about your medical condition. An ultrasound can also be used to monitor an existing condition. It will be our doctor or other health professional who decides that you might benefit from having an ultrasound scan.

What are the risks?

Ultrasound is a very safe procedure for all patients undergoing a diagnostic test. The operator will scan for as long as is necessary to provide the required information within all technical limits. This type of scan will not have any side effects.

Are there any alternatives?

Depending on your signs and symptoms, there may be alternative tests available including a CT scan or an MRI scan. If there is a more suitable examination the department will contact your referring professional to inform them.

How can I prepare for an ultrasound scan?

If any preparation is required, this information will be provided at the time of booking your appointment, or in your appointment letter. Preparations depend on the body part being scanned and may include, for example, a period of fasting if looking at the gallbladder or liver, or, drinking water and not emptying your bladder for pelvis. Any medications can still be taken with water prior to your scan.

Comfortable clothing may be of benefit also to minimise the need for getting undressed/changed into a hospital gown.

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Giving my consent (permission)

We want to involve you in decisions about your care and treatment. The sonographer/radiologist will ask you if you are happy for the scan to go ahead. This is called verbal consent. If you do not wish to have the scan or are undecided, please tell the sonographer/radiologist. It is your decision and you can change your mind at any time. Please bear in mind that not having the scan may delay your diagnosis.

If you wish to have a chaperone present during your scan, please alert a health care professional before the scan begins.

Students/trainees may be present during the examination but only with your verbal consent.

Please remember that you can ask the sonographer/radiologist any questions you have at any time before, during or after your scan. If you would like more information about our consent process, please speak to a member of staff caring for you.

What happens during an ultrasound?

You will be asked to remove your clothes covering the area for examination and to lie on the examination couch. Here, you will have water based clear gel applied to the skin in the area of examination. The sonographer/radiologist will slowly move the probe over the area while viewing the images produced on the monitor. The lights in the room will be dimmed so that the images on the screen can be seen more clearly and records of selected images will be made so that they can be viewed later. Once the examination is over, the gel will be wiped off and you will be free to dress and leave.

Will I feel any pain?

You cannot feel ultrasound, however, it is important for the sonographer/radiologist to examine you in the correct position and to gently press down on the probe to get a good view. For some people this may be uncomfortable.

If you do feel uncomfortable please inform the sonographer/radiologist, so that suitable adjustments can be made.

How long will the ultrasound scan take?

This depends on which part of your body is being scanned and the information your referrer needs. Scans can take between 15-40 minutes. Occasionally, a second opinion is required which can increase the exam time. You should allow at least one hour in the ultrasound department. We try to avoid delays, however, sometimes we may need to take emergency cases in ahead of your appointment. Please allow extra time in case of delays on the day of your appointment.

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When will I get the results?

The results will be sent to the doctor or other professional who referred you for the scan. The sonographer will tell you how to get your results and how long it will take, as this may be different for each patient. You may already have an appointment with the doctor or clinic that referred you. If not, please contact them to arrange a time to talk about the results and any treatment you may need.

If you are staying in hospital, the results will be given to the doctors looking after you on the ward.

Contact us: If you have any questions, or concerns about, or need to cancel/reschedule your ultrasound scan, please contact the radiology reception on: 01-2115020/01-2115061 (direct line) or email (radiology.stch@hse.ie) Monday to Friday, 9am to 4:30 pm.