

# Important Patient Information on:

# Prenatal Ultrasound

*The Alberta Clinical Practice Guidelines Program recommends that a prenatal ultrasound examination be offered to all pregnant women at 18 weeks gestation.*

**Please read this brochure carefully and discuss it with your clinician.**



*Administered by the Alberta Medical Association*

## What is prenatal ultrasound?

Prenatal ultrasound uses sound waves to create a picture of your fetus (baby) on a special T.V. screen. This picture is called a sonogram. It gives your clinician information about the structure, size and movement of your fetus as well as the number of fetuses and the location of the placenta. Certain pictures are printed onto film and checked by a specialist.

## Should every pregnant woman have an ultrasound?

It is recommended that all pregnant women be offered an ultrasound in their 18th week of pregnancy as a part of routine prenatal care. The major benefits are that ultrasound in obstetrics has been shown to:

- ◆ increase the frequency with which major malformations are detected before birth,
- ◆ provide a good estimate of fetal age in the first half of pregnancy to within 14 days,
- ◆ detect twin and higher order multiple gestations, and
- ◆ determine placental location.

You can choose whether you want it or not. In making your decision you may want to consider your personal preferences, the clinician's advice about your medical history, and if the clinician wants to check for a certain medical condition.

## When is prenatal ultrasound done?

The best time for an ultrasound is in your 18th week of pregnancy. At that time a picture of your fetus can be seen. An ultrasound may be suggested at other times in your pregnancy if your clinician thinks there is a good medical reason.

## What are the benefits of ultrasound?

Prenatal ultrasound can be used to:

- ◆ confirm your due date,
- ◆ check the number of fetuses,
- ◆ check for some abnormalities,
- ◆ make sure your fetus is growing properly,
- ◆ check how much amniotic fluid is around the fetus,
- ◆ check your uterus and ovaries,
- ◆ locate the placental position, and
- ◆ guide other tests like amniocentesis.

With this information your clinician can plan for your prenatal care and your delivery.

## Can I find out the sex of my baby from having an ultrasound?

Ultrasound scanning at 18 weeks is not always accurate in finding out the sex of your baby. Because the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada recommends that ultrasounds should not be used to determine the sex of the fetus, please do not ask for the sex of your baby.

## Is prenatal ultrasound safe?

Prenatal ultrasound has been used for more than 25 years. There does not appear to be any danger for either the mother or fetus from ultrasound. No radiation is used.

## What are the risks associated with having an ultrasound?

Prenatal ultrasound is simple and painless, but some women say that it is stressful. Tests done by skillful technologists give helpful information to the clinician.

Sometimes the results from an ultrasound might lead the clinician to think that there is something wrong when there really isn't. This is called a *false positive* finding and it can lead to more tests and can be stressful. Your clinician will discuss the need for more tests with you.

## What are the limitations of ultrasound?

Ultrasound, like any other diagnostic test has limitations. It cannot detect all abnormalities, and, in very rare cases, it may suggest an abnormality when one does not exist. Finding an abnormality depends on many factors including the developmental stage of the fetus, its position in the uterus, and the size and type of abnormality.

Sometimes the test may not pick up the abnormalities present (false negatives) due to technical limitations or the small size of the fetus.

## **How do I prepare for the ultrasound examination?**

To obtain the best picture of your fetus, it is important that you have a full bladder. It is suggested that you do not empty your bladder for 90 minutes before the examination. Contact your local ultrasound facility for specific instructions.

## **What can I expect during the ultrasound examination?**

The ultrasound examination is painless. You may feel some discomfort from pressure on your full bladder. It usually takes 20-30 minutes to complete the ultrasound. There are different ways an ultrasound can be done. The most common way is by scanning the abdomen with a hand-held scanner. A gel is placed on your skin to conduct the sound waves. The procedure may also be done vaginally. A trained technologist will do your ultrasound. The results will be reviewed by a specialist and reported to your clinician. Upon your request, some facilities, but not all, will invite your partner to view your unborn fetus upon completion of the ultrasound examination. Check with the facility that you are attending as to whether your partner can attend.

## **When will I get the results of my ultrasound?**

The results are usually available within two weeks. Your clinician will usually discuss these results with you at your next prenatal visit.

## **What if an abnormality is found by ultrasound?**

For most women, the ultrasound will show that everything is going well in their pregnancy. Sadly, for a few women, the ultrasound will show that something is wrong with their baby. This can be very stressful for the woman and her partner. For this reason, your clinician will be contacted and will discuss this with you. In such cases, you may be referred to a specialist trained and experienced in the diagnosis and management of such abnormalities.

## **Is prenatal ultrasound covered by the Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan?**

A prenatal ultrasound requested by your doctor is covered by the Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan.

## **Who is a Clinician?**

A clinician may be your general practitioner, family physician, obstetrician, or registered midwife.

*This information guide is prepared by a working group of the Alberta Clinical Practice Guidelines Program. It is intended to assist you with decision making when your pregnancy is not considered high-risk. If you have any further questions please ask your doctor or registered midwife or ultrasound technologist.*

A version of this pamphlet is available on the Alberta Medical Association web site:  
<http://www.albertadoctors.org>

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