ULTRASOUND EVALUATION IN PREGNANCY

Ultrasound is an easy and noninvasive way to see internal structures of the body by sending high frequency sound waves through the skin. In an obstetrical examination, this means that the baby inside the mother’s uterus can be seen and observed. Basically, the system works like this: A machine, the transducer, sends a brief pulse of sound (about a millionth of a second long) into the body. The sound travels into the abdomen and sends back an echo when it reaches the uterus and the baby. These echoes are seen as an image on the TV monitor of the machine. Either an abdominal or a transvaginal transducer may be used, depending on how far along you are in your pregnancy and what information we are seeking. Sounds produced by the transducer are very high pitched and cannot be heard by humans.

While routine ultrasound during pregnancy is controversial in the United States, many doctors worldwide feel a screening ultrasound should be offered to all pregnant women at eighteen weeks gestation. It is not known if this is cost effective or if the potential benefits outweigh any theoretical risks.

The possible benefits of ultrasound include early recognition of:

1. Wrong dates
2. Twins or other multiple gestations
3. Placenta problems
4. Occasional fetal anomalies
5. Impending miscarriage

While questions have been raised as to the safety of ultrasound, no known adverse effects on babies have been reported in more than 25 years of use. 4-D ultrasounds, while providing entertainment and enjoyment, have not been shown to improve pregnancy outcomes.

Ultrasound is usually covered by insurance if there is an indication to perform one. This has also led to the philosophy in this country that ultrasound be performed only for a recognized indication. Because ultrasound may be of some value to parents even when an indication is not found, we will perform an ultrasound for any pregnant woman requesting one. Your insurance may not cover the cost.

It is important that anyone requesting an ultrasound realize that this technology has limitations. For example, one study in Boston of over 7000 pregnancies identified one half of cardiac malformations using ultrasound during pregnancy. This also means that one half of cardiac problems were missed. A “normal” ultrasound does not guarantee a “normal” baby.

Remember, if you desire an ultrasound, it should be performed at approximately 18-20 weeks for maximum information and benefit.