



Breast Ultrasound

Consumer Information

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What is a breast ultrasound?

Breast ultrasound is the examination of the breast tissue using an *ultrasound* scan. Ultrasound uses high frequency soundwaves to produce images (or pictures) of the body that are displayed on a screen.

Ultrasound of the breast helps to distinguish fluid filled lumps in the breast (cysts) from solid lumps which may be cancerous or benign (non-cancerous). It is often useful to examine the breasts of younger women because the breast tissue is much denser than it is in older women, and this density can make it harder to detect an abnormality if a mammogram is performed.

Ultrasound is also used to diagnose problems such as complications from mastitis (an infection that occurs most often during breastfeeding), to assess abnormal nipple discharge, to assess problems with breast implants and to guide the placement of a needle during biopsies.

How do I prepare for a breast ultrasound?

No preparation is necessary for this examination.

It is advisable to wear a two piece outfit so that only your top has to be removed to provide access to the breast area.

What happens during a breast ultrasound?

You will be asked to remove your top and bra and change into a gown.

You will be asked to lie on a bed and one breast at a time will be examined.

A triangular sponge will be placed behind your shoulder so that you are rolled slightly onto your side. This helps position the breast to make scanning more effective.

Gel is applied to the skin and an ultrasound probe (called a transducer) is placed on the breast and gently moved around the breast to examine the breast tissue.

Examination of the armpit (or axilla) will also be undertaken to assess for any enlarged lymph glands (or nodes – a lump or swelling). See *ultrasound* for further details.

Are there any after effects of a breast ultrasound?

There are no after effects of a breast ultrasound.

How long does a breast ultrasound take?

The examination takes between 15-30 minutes.

Sometimes the *sonographer* will ask you to wait and have the images checked by the *radiologist* (specialist doctor). Sometimes it will be necessary for the radiologist to attend the examination because it may be important to see the images on the screen rather than as still photographs. The radiologist may also want to examine your breast if you have a symptom (like a lump or skin changes) and might also ask you some questions about these symptoms. This extra information may help the radiologist to understand your ultrasound pictures in order to give an accurate diagnosis.

What are the risks of a breast ultrasound?

There are no risks from ultrasound. Even if you are pregnant you are able to safely have an ultrasound examination.

What are the benefits of a breast ultrasound?

Ultrasound examination allows the detection and identification of most breast lumps.

This allows doctors to differentiate between cysts and solid lumps. It may also help to decide whether your breast lump may require a biopsy (see *fine needle aspiration, vacuum assisted core biopsy*).

Ultrasound can also help to diagnose:

- Complications associated with mastitis (like a breast abscess).
- Problems with breast implants.
- Some conditions that cause a nipple discharge.

Who does the breast ultrasound?

The examination is performed by a health professional specially trained and accredited to perform the test, such as a *sonographer*, sonologist, *radiologist* or a breast physician.

They may be male or female. If you are not comfortable with a male you should let the reception staff know this prior to having the test. In cases where the patient is young, a female chaperone may be requested (usually a nurse at the hospital or practice). A female parent, other relative, friend, or male partner can stay with you during the examination if you are more comfortable with this.

Where is a breast ultrasound done?

The examination is performed in a radiology department of a hospital, private radiology practice, or at a specialist clinic. The examination is performed in the privacy of an ultrasound room which may be dimly lit to allow the images on the ultrasound machine to be clearly seen by the person performing the scanning.

When can I expect the results of my breast ultrasound?

The time it takes your doctor to receive a written report on the test or procedure will vary depending on:

- the urgency with which the results are required by your doctor;
- the complexity of the test or procedure;
- whether more information is needed from your doctor before the test or procedure can be interpreted by the radiologist;
- whether you have had previous X-rays or other medical imaging that need to be compared with this test or procedure (this is commonly the case if you have a disease or condition that is being assessed as to its progress);
- how the report is sent to your doctor (i.e. phone, email, fax or mail).

Please feel free to ask the private practice, clinic, or hospital when the written report will be provided to your doctor.

It is important that you discuss the results with your doctor, either in person or on the telephone, so that they can explain what the results mean for you.

Useful websites about breast ultrasound

Cancer Australia – Breast Cancer

www.cancer australia.gov.au/affected-cancer/cancer-types/breast-cancer

Please note:

This information is of a general nature only and is not intended as a substitute for medical advice. It is designed to support, not replace, the relationship that exists between a patient and his/her doctor. It is recommended that any specific questions regarding your procedure be discussed with your family doctor or medical specialist

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