

Prenatal Sonography: Not Just a Pretty Picture

One of the things families look forward to most during pregnancy is the opportunity to see their babies before birth. As sonographers and physicians, we feel privileged to share in this special time. The sonographic evaluation of the fetus is a diagnostic medical test and as such, is useful for detecting complications of pregnancy. Unfortunately, not all fetuses are healthy and not all pregnancies have a joyful outcome. We would like to share some situations that people might consider when planning for their ultrasound.

The purpose of the sonographic evaluation is to assess fetal viability, gestational age and growth. It also provides the opportunity to diagnose some birth defects and to observe variations in fetal anatomy that may be associated with increased risk of genetic abnormalities. While most fetuses are normal and the majority of patients' outcomes are happy, there are occasions when a baby may not be alive or may be diagnosed for the first time with a major birth defect. These difficult situations are not predictable and may result in a "longer than expected" wait for your scheduled obstetrical ultrasound appointment.

At times, parents bring additional family members, friends and older children to their ultrasound appointments, however, there can be a downside to having people other than the parents in the room during the appointment. Some of the potential issues are:

1. At the conclusion of the sonogram, the preliminary results of your study will be discussed with you; your guests will be privy to medical information regarding your pregnancy.
2. Most young children do not have the patience to observe a detailed medical examination that may last 30 minutes or more. If problems arise with your ultrasound, the appointment may take longer than expected. Young children become distracted and this results in the attention of the parent(s) being directed towards the sibling instead of the fetus. The behavior of the bored child or "stressed" parent may lengthen the amount of time required to perform, interpret and explain the examination.

3. Parents who are distracted by their young children may not be able to process information or ask questions of the provider.
4. Our ultrasound facility is not “childproof” and young children who are not vigilantly supervised may be exposed to dangerous situations including stairs and medical waste. The temptation to touch expensive medical equipment can be tantalizing.

We are asking for your help to maximize our ability to give you the optimal medical care. While we recognize that certain emergency situations arise, we recommend that young children (less than 5 years old) not to be brought to your sonographic exam if at all possible. If you choose to bring them, it is crucial that another responsible adult caretaker be available to care for the child if the need arises. In the event that a child’s behavior compromises the sonographic study, we will ask you to reschedule your evaluation at a more suitable time. We want to give our full, undivided attention to you and your unborn baby.