

William F. Erber, M.D., P.C.  
Gastroenterology and Endoscopy  
Diseases of the Digestive Tract, Liver and Pancreas  
Board Certified

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## Abdominal ultrasound

Abdominal [ultrasound](#) is a type of imaging test. It is used to examine organs in the abdomen including the liver, gallbladder, spleen, pancreas, and kidneys. The blood vessels that lead to some of these organs can also be looked at with ultrasound.

### How the Test is Performed

An ultrasound machine makes images of organs and structures inside the body. The machine sends out high-frequency sound waves that reflect off body structures. A computer receives these waves and uses them to create a picture. Unlike with [x-rays](#) or CT scans, this test does not expose you to ionizing radiation.

You will be lying down for the procedure. A clear, water-based conducting gel is applied to the skin over the abdomen. This helps with the transmission of the sound waves. A handheld probe called a transducer is then moved over the abdomen.

You may need to change position so that the health care provider can look at different areas. You may also need to hold your breath for short periods during the exam.

Most of the time, the test takes less than 30 minutes.

### How to Prepare for the Test

Preparation steps vary depending on the problem. Most of the time, people are asked not to eat or drink for several hours before the exam. Your health care provider will go over what you need to do.

### How the Test Will Feel

There is little discomfort. The conducting gel may feel a little cold and wet.

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## Why the Test is Performed

You may have this test to:

- Find the cause of abdominal pain
- Find the cause of kidney infections
- Diagnose a [hernia](#)
- Diagnose and monitor tumors and cancers
- Diagnose or treat [ascites](#)
- Learn why there is swelling of an abdominal organ
- Look for damage after an injury
- Look for stones in the gallbladder or kidney
- Look for the cause of abnormal blood tests such as [liver function tests](#) or kidney tests
- Look for the cause of a fever

The reason for the test will depend on your symptoms.

## Normal Results

The organs examined appear normal.

## What Abnormal Results Mean

The meaning of abnormal results depends on the organ being examined and the type of problem. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions or concerns. An abdominal ultrasound can indicate conditions such as:

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- Abdominal aortic aneurysm
- [Abscess](#)
- [Appendicitis](#)
- [Cholecystitis](#)
- [Gallstones](#)
- [Hydronephrosis](#)
- [Kidney stones](#)
- Pancreatitis (inflammation in pancreas)
- Spleen enlargement ([splenomegaly](#))

## Risks

There is no known risk. You are not exposed to ionizing radiation.

## Alternative Names

Ultrasound - abdomen; Abdominal sonogram

## References

Cosgrove DO, Meire HB, Lim A, Eckersley RJ. Ultrasound: general principles. In: Adam A, Dixon AK, eds. *Grainger & Allison's Diagnostic Radiology: A Textbook of Medical Imaging*

Kim DH, Pickhardt PJ. Diagnostic imaging procedures in gastroenterology. In: Goldman L, Ausiello D, eds. *Cecil Medicine*

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<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003777.htm>