



SASUOG

South African Society for Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynaecology

Patient information - Who should do my scan?

Ultrasound examination in pregnancy and gynaecological ultrasound examinations can be done by many different health professionals. This includes sonographers, midwives, sonologists, obstetrician/gynaecologists, maternal and fetal medicine specialists and radiologists. Although they can all scan pregnant women, their training and level of expertise are very different.

Sonographer

A sonographer is a healthcare professional (not a doctor) trained to obtain, describe and interpret ultrasound images.

Their training can last from three to five years at one of the Universities of Technology and sonographers need to be registered in ultrasonography with the Health professions council of SA (HPCSA).

A sonographer might work independently, or in a practice together with a sonologist, radiologist or maternal and fetal medicine specialist, but cannot undertake clinical management independently.

An ultrasound examination with a sonographer is an excellent (and often cost-effective) choice if there are no particular risk factors in your pregnancy and screening results have been normal.

Midwife

A midwife is a specialised nurse who provides help and advice to women during pregnancy, labour and the time after delivery and has obtained an additional advanced midwifery diploma after qualifying for and registering as a professional nurse or staff nurse with the HOCSA.

A midwife usually only performs basic ultrasound examinations in pregnancy (e.g. confirmation and dating of pregnancy, determining the baby's position in the uterus).

Sonologist

A sonologist is a doctor, usually a general practitioner, who predominantly focuses his or her practice on performing ultrasound examinations.

The training required for this is the general medical training of eight years as a doctor, followed by additional training in ultrasound.

Sonologists are not registered as a special category with the HPCSA as there is no nationally prescribed training program for sonologists and no official regulation regarding minimum standards.

The training of South African sonologists is highly variable in time and quality and a sonologist can be skilled to perform only basic or more advanced ultrasound examinations, depending on his or her level of expertise.

If an advanced ultrasound assessment of a pregnancy is required, only sonologists endorsed by SASUOG for specialised fetal scans are recommended (see website) as they have the expertise to diagnose and manage fetal problems.

Obstetrician (O&G)

An obstetrician / gynaecologist (O&G) is a doctor who has specialized in obstetrics and gynaecology by completing an additional four years' specialist training program after qualifying as a general practitioner.

The O&G usually performs basic ultrasound examinations as part of his / her obstetrical and gynaecological care but some also perform more advanced ultrasound examinations after having undergone additional training on a voluntary basis.

Radiologist

A radiologist is a doctor who has specialized in radiology by completing a four years' specialist training program in radiology after qualifying as a doctor.

Radiologists generally perform only basic ultrasound examinations in pregnancy (e.g. confirmation and dating of pregnancy).

They can report ultrasound findings to the referring clinician but cannot provide counselling or make management decisions as they are specialised in imaging but not in obstetrics.

Maternal and Fetal Medicine Specialist (MFM)

A maternal and fetal medicine specialist (MFM) is an obstetrician and gynaecologist who has specialised in maternal and fetal medicine by completing an additional two years' training program after qualifying as an O&G.

MFMs are registered as subspecialists in MFM with the HPCSA and have the expertise to diagnose and manage fetal and maternal problems.

Now then, who should do my scan?

Although many practitioners call themselves fetal specialists because they limit their practice to ultrasound examinations during pregnancy, this term is very misleading as “fetal specialist” is not a recognised qualification for HPCSA registration and the level of expertise can be highly variable.

Before you decide where to go for your ultrasound examination, please discuss it with your obstetrician / gynaecologist to make sure you get the level of care that you and your baby require.

If there are specific risk factors in a pregnancy, or ultrasound findings or other screening tests indicating a possible problem with the baby, the ultrasound evaluation should ideally be done by a MFM or a SASUOG endorsed sonologist. These risk factors include medical problems (such as diabetes), medication, drug or alcohol usage, or family members with inborn problems.