

FACT SHEET: COMMERCIAL ULTRASOUND FOR FETAL PICTURES AND VIDEOS

Recently in the United States there has been a proliferation of commercial studios offering ultrasound pictures and videos to pregnant women for a fee. Although the desire of expectant parents to see their baby and obtain pictures before birth is certainly understandable this activity has raised concerns from several different perspectives.

Ultrasound waves are a form of energy which affects body tissues and even at low levels they can have physical effects. These effects include a rise in temperature and vibrations within living tissue. Although at this time there is no proven harmful effect to the human fetus from ultrasound waves these physical effects still are cause for some concern, particularly with regard to the sensitive developing organs of the fetus.

In the early 1900s, after x-rays were discovered, it was thought that they were harmless. Many shoe stores had an x-ray machine which you could step up on to see the bones of your feet. Children and adults got a great thrill from this, but it was only later that it was realized that exposure to x-rays has risks, including an increased chance of developing certain cancers later in life. For this reason, x-ray machines are no longer found in shoe stores and human exposure to x-rays is reserved for medical indications.

It took 50 years from the beginning of x-ray use to realize that they carried health risks. By contrast, the widespread use of ultrasound in pregnancy hasn't even reached 30 years yet—strongly arguing for continued caution in its use so as to avoid any unnecessary exposure to the fetus. At Tripler we hold to the principles of using the lowest energy possible, for the shortest time necessary, to obtain the information required to best assist in the care of your pregnancy.

The American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine, which together with the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American College of Radiology has developed the most widely used standard guidelines for prenatal ultrasound, “strongly discourages the nonmedical use of ultrasound for . . . entertainment purposes.”

The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the government agency charged with protecting the public health with regard to the use of medical devices, has issued the following caution:

Persons who promote, sell or lease ultrasound equipment for making 'keepsake' fetal videos should know that the FDA views this as an unapproved use of a medical device. In addition, those who subject individuals to ultrasound exposure using a diagnostic ultrasound device (a prescription device) without a physician's order may be in violation of state or local laws or regulations regarding use of a prescription medical device.

(www.fda.gov/cdrh/consumer/fetalvideos.html)

For this reason many of these commercial studios request that a pregnant woman obtain the signature of her physician or other health care provider in order to obtain their services. In essence, this is a request for a physician “prescription” for the sonogram, as partial protection from any legal concerns which might arise from their activity. It is important to know that these studios have no standards to which they are required to adhere and no regulatory oversight.

Because all medically indicated sonograms during pregnancy are both available and performed through Tripler, and because we cannot endorse this commercial use of ultrasound for the above reasons, we do not sign these requests as a matter of policy.