

Female pelvic ultrasound

What is a pelvic ultrasound?

A pelvic ultrasound is a non-invasive scan of the female genital tract. It allows the study of the cervix, the uterus, the ovaries, the fallopian tubes and the surrounding structures.

How is a pelvic scan performed?

The pelvic ultrasound can be performed in two ways:

- 1) Trans-vaginal. The scan is performed internally (inserting the probe in the vagina) and it requires an empty bladder. Trans-vaginal ultrasound usually produces better and clearer images of the pelvic organ because the probe lies closer to the structures.
- 2) Trans-abdominal. The ultrasound probe is placed on the abdomen. The bladder must be full. The trans-abdominal ultrasound is the first choice in particular cases (vaginal stenosis, large pelvic masses which are not well viewed with trans-vaginal scan, virgo patients, etc.).

When should a pelvic ultrasound be performed? Is it painful?

A pelvic ultrasound can be performed at any time during the menstrual cycle or in menopause. Sometimes it might be required in specific phases of the cycle. Performing a trans-vaginal ultrasound is usually painless, sometimes it causes a mild discomfort.

What are the reasons for a pelvic ultrasound?

There are different conditions that require a pelvic scan (pelvic pain, irregular and frequent periods, postmenopausal bleeding, etc.). This exam can identify benign and malignant disorders affecting the female genital tract. It is also used as a surveillance tool in patients who have undergone surgery or are under specific medical treatment.

What are the limits of the pelvic ultrasound?

Up to 10 % of performed ultrasound scans do not identify the thickness of the endometrium. Sometimes in menopause women the ovaries are not detectable. Even when performed in optimal conditions, the accuracy of the pelvic ultrasound is not absolute. Although the ultrasound scan is a sensitive method for detecting pelvic masses it provides both false negative and false positive results. In all cases pelvic ultrasound does not allow to exclude with certainty a medical condition of the uterus or the ovaries.

Are further exams required after the trans-vaginal scan?

The doctor might complete the medical examination with a trans-abdominal ultrasound. Sometimes it might be useful to repeat the exam in another phase of the cycle or at a later date, in order to assess the evolution of the any detected lesions. Other medical tests can be prescribed to help diagnose or monitor some conditions (CAT scan, MRI, etc.).