

# Understanding Fetal Echocardiogram

## What is a Fetal Echocardiogram?

A fetal echocardiogram, also referred to as a “fetal echo,” is the most common form of ultrasound to evaluate the baby's heart in greater detail than typically performed during a routine ultrasound visit. The examination is performed by a specially trained ultrasound sonographer and the images are interpreted by either a pediatric cardiologist or a maternal-fetal medicine specialist (perinatologist). A fetal echo is usually performed after 18 weeks gestation and a full bladder is not required.

## How does it differ from a routine ultrasound?

Although a fetal echo is performed in a similar manner as a regular ultrasound, and may even be performed in the same ultrasound unit, the difference lies with *who* performs the examination, and the *focus* of this detailed examination.

## Why might a fetal echocardiogram be performed?

Women who have one of the following risk factors should have a detailed fetal echocardiogram performed by a physician who is specially trained in fetal cardiac evaluation.

- gestational diabetes
- immediate family history of congenital heart defect (person born with a heart defect)
- concerns for a heart defect in current pregnancy

## How long is the examination?

You can expect this examination to take anywhere from 45–90 minutes depending on the complexity of the baby's heart. It is always a good idea to bring another care giver if you have other small children with you.

## What if my baby is found to have a heart defect?

When a heart defect is found, a pediatric cardiologist will explain in detail the diagnosis and implications as soon as the study is completed. In most cases the doctor may take additional pictures after the sonographer has completed the initial study.

## Is there anything else I need to know?

Even in the case of a totally normal, high quality study, you will be counseled that not all heart problems can be ruled out. This is because the structures of the fetal heart are small, and the circulation in the fetus is different than after birth.