Understanding a musculoskeletal ultrasound scan

Patient information | General educational guidance

What is the scan?

Musculoskeletal ultrasound uses high-frequency sound waves to create moving images of selected tendons, muscles, bursae, superficial joints and soft tissues. It does not use X-rays.

A scan may be useful if it answers a specific clinical question raised by your history and physical examination.

What happens during the appointment?

- The clinician asks about symptoms, medical history and functional goals.
- Gel is applied to the skin and a probe is moved over the area. You may be asked to move or contract a muscle.
- The clinician discusses the relevant findings, their limitations and whether additional investigations are appropriate.

What can it not tell us?

Not every painful structure looks abnormal on ultrasound, and some ultrasound findings are present in people without pain. Certain deep or internal joint structures may need a different test such as MRI or X-ray.

A scan should never replace discussion of symptoms, examination findings or patient preferences.

Privacy and image handling

Patient-identifying information must be removed before educational use of any image. Images should be shared only with appropriate consent and according to information governance procedures.

Further information

NHS (n.d.) Ultrasound scan. https://www.nhs.uk/tests-and-treatments/ultrasound-scan/

Wellbeing & Health Physio: diagnostic ultrasound guide (webpage in this development package).

General information only. This information does not replace individual clinical advice.
medical advice.