When is a musculoskeletal ultrasound scan useful?

Patient information | October 2026

Why consider ultrasound?

Ultrasound can examine selected tendons, muscles, ligaments, bursae and accessible joint structures in real time. It may help when the clinician has a specific question that could change management.

What can it show?

Certain superficial tendon changes, fluid collections, selected muscle injuries and some dynamic soft-tissue findings. It can also guide selected injections or aspirations.

What can it not replace?

History and physical examination remain essential. MRI or X-ray may be more appropriate for some deep joint, bone or complex internal structures. Scan changes do not always explain pain.

Is imaging needed for osteoarthritis?

Not routinely. NICE NG226 recommends diagnosing typical osteoarthritis clinically and not using imaging routinely unless features suggest a different or additional condition.

Five useful questions to ask

1. What question should the scan answer? 2. Could the answer change treatment? 3. What other investigations might be better? 4. Are abnormalities clinically relevant? 5. What is the rehabilitation plan afterward?

References

NICE (2022) *Osteoarthritis in over 16s: diagnosis and management*, NG226. https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng226/chapter/recommendations

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

This leaflet is general education and not an individual diagnosis. For severe or rapidly worsening symptoms seek urgent professional care.