

Ultrasound FAQs



What is an ultrasound?

An ultrasound is a way of looking inside your pet's body without having to perform surgery. The machine sends sound waves into the body, listens for the echoes coming back, then uses these echoes to form a picture on the screen. The sound waves are too high for us or our pets to hear, and produce no harmful effects as a diagnostic tool.

Why does my pet need an ultrasound?

There are many reasons why your veterinarian might recommend an ultrasound. In human medicine, most of us think about using an ultrasound for pregnancy or heart disease. In veterinary medicine, not only can we use the ultrasound for these things, but we can also investigate much more:

- Bloodwork abnormalities
- Recurrent urinary tract infections
- Enlarged organs
- Unexplained weight loss
- Chronic vomiting or diarrhea
- Trauma or hemorrhage
- Cancer staging
- Fluid in the chest or abdomen
- Enlarged lymph nodes
- Heart murmur
- Collapse or shortness of breath

What information does an ultrasound give you?

With the ultrasound, we are able to examine the organs in the body and we look at things like location, size, shape, texture and blood supply. Unfortunately, it does not always give us a clear picture of how well an organ is working – this may be determined by other tests such as bloodwork or additional imaging.

It is not uncommon to find “masses” within an organ during an ultrasound, although many of these turn out to be normal aging changes in older pets. It cannot always be determined by ultrasound whether something is benign (non-cancerous) or malignant (cancerous). Further testing may include an ultrasound – guided aspirate (pulling cells or tissue out with a small needle), additional imaging (such as MRI or CT), or surgery. You will always be contacted prior to any additional procedures.

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What happens to my pet during an ultrasound?

At Grand Valley Animal Clinic, we care about your pet as much as you do and we want them to have a positive experience. In order to ensure your pet feels comfortable with the procedure, our staff will take some time to make sure your pet is relaxed. Your pet will be gently positioned on a soft, padded foam trough while they are petted. The lighting is dimmed so that the veterinarian can see the screen properly, and the room is quiet so that your pet is as relaxed as possible. The scans take between 30-60 minutes, so most of our pets fall asleep. If pets are fidgety, brief breaks may be taken for their comfort. A warmed, water-based gel is applied to the area being scanned as the ultrasound probe is gently moved along the pet's skin. For most of the exam, minimal pressure is applied, but sometimes your pet might experience a slight "pushing" against their skin or move a little when we scan a "ticklish" or "itchy" spot. Our staff are very good at making sure your pet is relaxed and getting their total attention. We make every effort to make your pet as relaxed as possible, as we can obtain a more diagnostic examination if your pet is calm and relaxed. Occasionally, a pet is so nervous that we might ask to sedate them to feel more comfortable, reduce wiggling, stress or panting.

Why does my pet need to be shaved?

To obtain the best ultrasound images, good contact between the ultrasound probe and your pet's skin is necessary since sound waves don't travel through hair. Your pet will need to have the hair shaved from the area being scanned.

Can I be present during an ultrasound?

A staff member will take your pet to the ultrasound room. Due to the size of the room and the technical aspects of performing an ultrasound exam, we do not permit owners to accompany their pet to the ultrasound room. This allows the veterinarian to obtain the best images possible and focus their attention on the needs of your pet during the exam. If you wish, the veterinarian can meet with you to review the images obtained at a scheduled time. We appreciate your understanding.

What can I expect after the exam?

Ultrasound images will be sent to a Board Certified Radiologist/Cardiologist, and we will send their report as soon as it is available - typically within 24-48 hours. Your veterinarian may contact us (or the radiologist) to discuss the case further, but all communication with you regarding results will be through your regular veterinarian in order to provide seamless care. If your pet had sedation or additional tests or procedures, you will be given any special instructions at discharge.

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What do I need to do to prepare for the ultrasound?

For abdominal ultrasounds, your pet needs to be fasted (no food) for 8-10 hours prior to the scan to reduce the amount of food and gas in the gastrointestinal tract. Water can be given up to 2 hours prior to your appointment time. Gas is the ultrasound's enemy – it makes the sound waves bounce back and obscures the image. Also, please do not allow your pet to urinate within 4 hours of their appointment, as we will not be able to properly evaluate their urinary bladder when it is empty.

For heart ultrasounds, you do NOT need to remove water as this will alter the heart movements and measurements.

If your pet has high energy, or you think they will be nervous or aggressive, please speak to your regular veterinarian about oral anti-anxiety medication that can be given to relax them during the ultrasound exam. Medications such as trazodone or gabapentin administered 2 hours prior to the appointment can improve image quality, reduce the length of time required to perform the exam, and reduce the need for additional sedation.