Window into the Womb: What I Learned through Ultrasound after a Car Accident during My Pregnancy

By Nevena Krstić, Genetic Counselor, MotherToBaby Florida

When I was 17 weeks pregnant, my husband and I got in a car accident. The guy going in the opposite direction swerved into our lane and hit our car head on. Airbags deployed. The car was totaled.

Moments after the impact happened, I remember looking over at my husband to see that he was ok, unbuckling my seat belt which had left burn marks all over my pregnant belly, getting out of the car, and lying down on the sidewalk. And, as the adrenaline slowly went down, the immense fear overtook my whole body. I was alive, but what will happen to the baby?

The doctors scheduled me for an ultrasound. I was so nervous to get the ultrasound; the anxiety was almost unbearable. Ultrasounds are supposed to be fun, right? They always look so fun on TV. The couples are either joyously smiling or shedding happy tears as the doctor shows them images of their baby. Most of the time it is when they find out if they are having a boy or a girl. That is how I imagined my ultrasounds too. I was looking forward to the experience I imagined. I was not looking forward to the experience I was facing. ***I was dreading my ultrasound.***

Thankfully the baby was alive and appeared to be developing as expected. The accident did not appear to have harmed the baby directly. However, it did cause a small tear in my placenta causing it to bleed. The tear was small, but if it got bigger it could cause real problems including miscarriage. And the doctors had no way of predicting what would happen or when. All they could offer me was more ultrasounds.

What is the Purpose of an Ultrasound?

Ultrasounds are medical tests. They are mainly used as either a routine scan at around 18-22 weeks of pregnancy to look at the baby's developing body or the anatomy. This scan is therefore often referred to as the "anatomy scan." Ultrasounds are also used to look at the baby when there is a suspected problem or if there is a specific concern, such as bleeding during pregnancy, elevated risk on some routine blood testing, use of medication, or, as in my case, car accidents.

What Can Ultrasound Tell Me about My Baby?

Doctors are able to find out a lot of medical information during ultrasound. Ultrasound, also called sonogram, is a type of medical imaging that uses high-frequency sound waves to produce images which help doctors examine the baby's anatomy from head to toe, including images of the baby's brain, heart, spine, kidneys, and other organs.

Most women who have this ultrasound done will have a normal anatomy scan and are reassured that their baby is developing as expected. For some women, however, the ultrasound will show a change in the baby's size, the shape, size, or function of one of his/her organs, the amount of amniotic fluid around the baby, or changes to the placenta itself. A baby may be diagnosed with a specific birth defect (like a heart defect or a spine defect) on an anatomy scan. Some of these birth defects can be very serious. We know that every pregnancy has a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. The ultrasound may also show a finding that may raise concern for another pregnancy complication, and more ultrasounds or testing may be recommended.

Ultrasound, however, is not perfect. Ultrasound is good at ruling out problems, but is not perfect at finding every birth defect before baby is born. Therefore, a normal anatomy ultrasound does not guarantee that the baby won't have a birth defect or a complication. Sometimes the ultrasound may raise concern that there is a birth defect or complication when there really is not one seen on follow-up tests or after birth. There is no test that can be done before baby is born that can guarantee a perfectly healthy baby.

Are Ultrasounds Safe?

Typically, women will have two ultrasounds in pregnancy, one in the first trimester to confirm the pregnancy, and one anatomy scan in the second trimester. Some women, however, may need to have ultrasounds more often, especially if there are complications in pregnancy.

For me, in order to track the bleeding in my placenta and the growth of my baby, the doctors did one ultrasound every month of pregnancy… And every month I would walk into the ultrasound room filled with angst and anticipation of bad news. Thankfully bad news never came, the placental tear did not get bigger, and baby continued to grow. And by the last couple of ultrasounds, dare I say, I even looked forward to seeing my baby's squished little face. But it did make me wonder if exposing my baby to so many ultrasounds was safe?

All things considered, ultrasounds are generally ok. However, just like with every medical procedure, ultrasounds should only be performed if medically necessary and recommended by the doctor to avoid exposing baby to heat produced by the sound waves of ultrasound. Therefore, while moms-to-be may be tempted to get that 3D or 4D ultrasound, or buy your own fetal home monitor (and believe me I was), it may be best to avoid these additional ultrasounds and stick to the ones recommended by the doctor.

I went on to deliver a healthy baby girl, who is now a mobile little one-year-old. I thank my lucky stars for her every day. But in my pregnancy with her I realized a very important thing that I want to share. Ultrasounds can be fun and joyous events. For most pregnant moms they ***will*** be fun. They will reassure them that their babies are healthy and developing and may confirm for them the sex of the baby. Having that said, we should not take for granted that ultrasounds are very powerful medical tests that have the ability to tell moms a lot more information about the health of their baby. So supporting anxious moms as they enter their ultrasound appointments is key.

Nevena Krstić is a certified genetic counselor based in Tampa, Florida. She currently works for MotherToBaby Florida, which is housed at the University of South Florida Health in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

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