

HEALTHY LIVING

'U Tube'

Children of the digital age make grand first impressions

BY AMY ROYSTER

Cox News Service

In my defense, let me say this: I cried the first time I heard the heartbeat.

I knew from books that the ultrasound technician should be able to detect a beat by nine weeks. Eager to check off that milestone, I headed to my appointment. I expected to feel just relief. But when the amplified sound filled the room, a strong 160 beats a minute — boom boom, boom boom — my heart seized.

Alive.

Inside me?

Thank God!

And then, love. And tears.

So please bear this in mind when I confess my first thought upon laying eyes on a 3-D image of my unborn child a few months later:

"Stop resting your face in your hands! You're going to get acne!"

Really, is that the kind of thing a mother-to-be should be concerned about?

How quickly we ricochet between the important and the superficial.

There, in a keepsake ultrasound photo, is our baby, a nameless, genderless — at least as far as my husband and I know — unborn child pressing the palm of its hand against its cheek. We can see little fingers curled under and facial skin pulled taut beneath.

So peaceful. Daydreaming, perhaps. Or a little bored. Or maybe just practicing pushing and pulling with its new appendage.

Who knows?

There's an alien quality to these images only the most sentimental mother will ignore. A 5-month-old unborn baby looks so human and so strange at the same time.

And my second thought on closer inspection: It looks like a boy.

Forgive me in advance, sweetheart, if you

are a girl.

These 3-D photos reveal amazing details, unlike the flat, grainy images expectant parents are used to seeing. But they do not provide an exact likeness of what a baby will look like at birth. The amniotic fluid creates distortion. And there's the simple fact that, at 20 weeks pregnant — when our ultrasound technician surprised us with a 3-D print-out — there are months of "cooking" to come.

So, if you're a boy, then your intuitive mother was right.

And if you're a girl, well then, you just weren't finished yet.

Which brings me to my final thought, one that bubbled up in my hormonal head only after a few days of staring, google-eyed, at the image: Baby, where is your chin?

I didn't dare speak this out loud. And yet, it kept nagging.

Maybe it's the angle? Maybe it's the imperfect technology?

Or maybe — gasp! — my baby has no chin?

Impossible. I have a chin. My husband has a chin. In fact, caricatures of him always exaggerate the chin. And everyone — and I mentally checked off each person on both sides of our family — has a chin.

A few days later, I mention to a friend how funny these 3-D images are. So human,

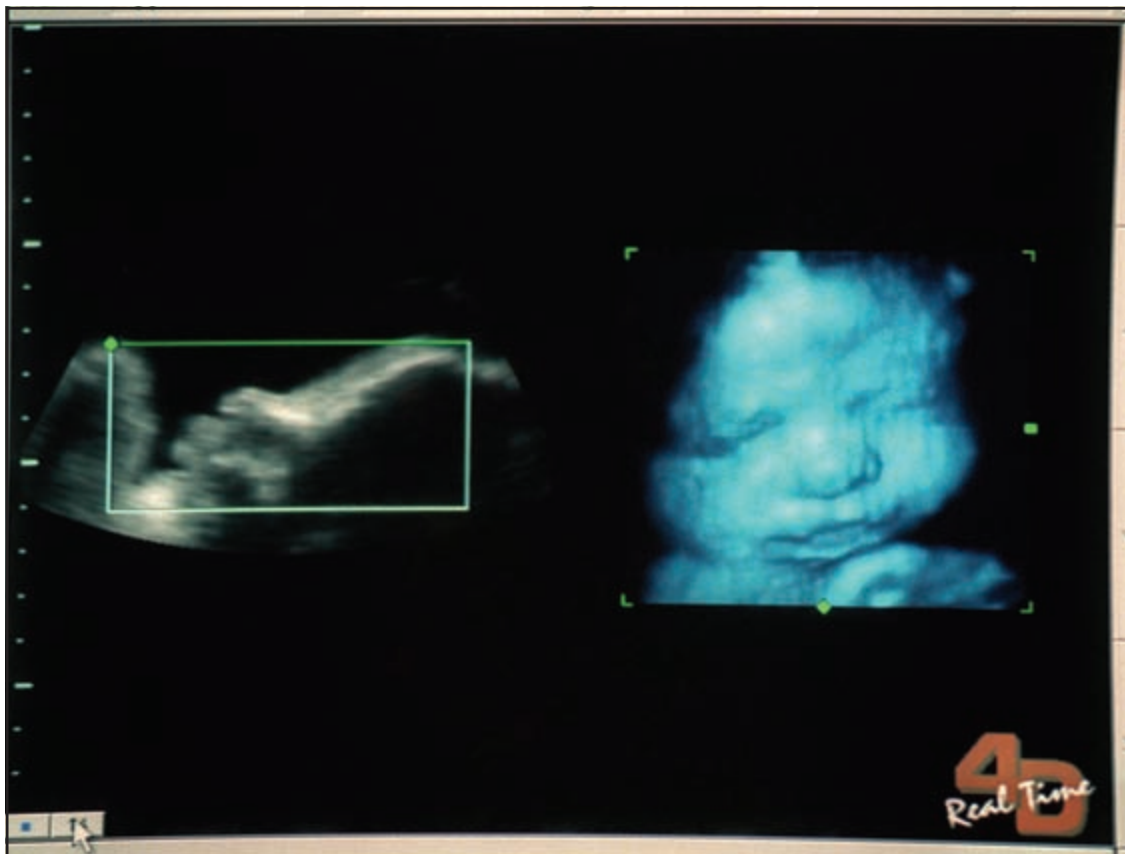


PHOTO BY JENNIFER PODIS / COX NEWS SERVICE

A traditional two-dimensional ultrasound image (left) is compared to an image from the latest ultrasound technology that shows motion. The pictures are from a video provided by the 4-D ultrasound system's maker, GE Medical Systems, and show two different angles taken at the same time.

and yet, so alien, I repeat to her.

She must have picked up on my tone.

"I know," she said. "I didn't think my baby had a chin when I saw the photos. But babies' chins fill out after they're born."

Oh sweet relief! I'm not the only one.

And then utter guilt for thinking such a trivial thing.

Not that I don't have deeper concerns:

Who is this person growing inside me?

Will my baby recognize me as its mother? Will I recognize myself as one?

In some ways, though, technology has given me reassurance: There's no denying my heart burst when I first heard the heartbeat. So come pimples or clear complexion, chin or no chin, this little baby already has made me crazy with love.

I don't need a fancy photograph to tell me that. ■

Jury is still out on safety of 4-D ultrasounds

BY CAROLYN SUSMAN

Cox News Service

Bring your popcorn and a Coke. Relax and "see your unborn baby in live 4-D motion on a 100-inch screen. Our ultrasound theater can seat 10 family members." A Tampa, Fla., imaging center, Storksvision Ultrasound, runs this ad online.

That's the kind of hype that's probably a bit more than most prospective parents need to entice them to see — and buy — amazing photos and videos of their baby, before birth.

"When they come to determine a gender, they bring the grandmother, father, the whole family; it's a very joyful experience for the sonographer and for the mothers. The energy is very happy," says Lorraine Salt, owner of the Look Who's Kickin' Ultrasounds imaging center in Delray Beach, Fla.

What's unique about these centers is that they use sophisticated, 4-D ultrasound equipment that can show the fetus moving around. A 3-D ultrasound takes thousands of images at once that are stored and shaded to make a 3-D image. A 4-D image adds movement.

Ultrasound machines use sound waves, not radiation, that bounce back from the

organ or fetus that is being scanned. Those waves are converted into images.

Not everyone is a fan of the imaging. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists says the videos may be subjecting a fetus to unnecessary procedures when the ultrasound is performed for a reason other than medical or diagnostic testing.

"Not much is known about the effects of repeated exposure to ultrasound," ACOG posts on its Web site, www.acog.org. "It seems to be safe, but it is possible that problems could be found in the future."

The Institute of Ultrasound Medicine seemed particularly concerned in 2005 when actor Tom Cruise purchased an ultrasound machine so he and his fiancée, Katie Holmes, could do their own sonograms.

"Purchase of an ultrasound machine for private, at-home use entails inappropriate operation of a prescription medical device designed for diagnostic use by a trained medical professional," the group said in a statement issued at the time.

Salt, however, feels strongly that the imaging is safe for the fetus.

"There are no proven biological ill effects. ... 4-Ds have been on the market five years with no proven detrimental effects. [The imaging] helps the mother bond with her child. The face, heartbeat — it creates a very strong sense of bonding with the baby."

Another concern of 4-D ultrasounds is that some imaging centers may not have trained technicians who can interpret the images correctly.

"I use the lowest reasonable settings on the machine to achieve the best result," says Salt, who is a licensed sonographer. "Not to say anything against anybody else, but anybody who is operating an ultrasound should be a registered technician."

She and other members of the Look Who's Kickin' franchise insist that the mothers on whom they perform ultrasounds be under the care of an obstetrician and already have had diagnostic imaging before they come in.

Because she has been trained to interpret ultrasounds, Salt knows that it's possible she will see something a mom would be shocked to know. One mother who came in for a keepsake ultrasound already knew from prior diagnostic testing that her child had a clubfoot, so it was a non-issue for Salt.

Beyond diagnostic use, when doctors use these expensive 3-D or 4-D machines as part of a medical practice, they can be used for keepsake videos. Dr. John Burigo of Ob/Gyn Specialists of the Palm Beaches says his practice has equipment that allows 3-D ultrasound in all his office locations, but he stresses that the first priority for the use of the machines should be medical.

"Some patients may request an opportu-

nity to see their baby's facial profile. This is not encouraged since there is no medical necessity. ... Although ultrasound

has been performed for many years, and there is no evidence that it is harmful, we recommend that it be used for the medical purposes it was designed for."

But when push comes to shove, Burigo's patients can get the photo album and video variety of pre-birth photos.

"When it is done, patients are provided with still pictures, a DVD and video clip, in most instances. We do strive to be as accommodating to our patients as possible. We are not in the business of fetal photography. The cost is \$250 plus tax," Burigo said.

Insurance, by the way, doesn't cover this elective procedure. ■



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Ultrasound machines convert sound waves into images.