

Having a Barium Swallow

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Introduction

This leaflet aims to answer your questions about having a barium meal. It explains the benefits, risks and alternatives, as well as what you can expect when you come to hospital. If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is a barium swallow?

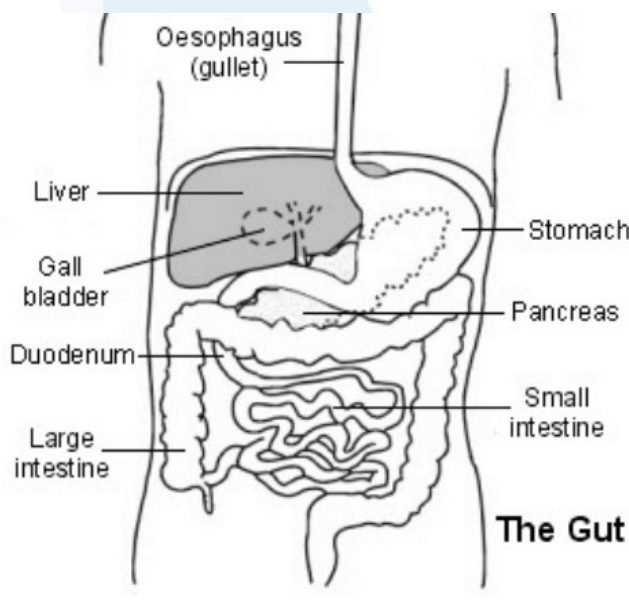
A barium swallow is an examination of the oesophagus (food pipe) and the stomach. These areas of your body cannot normally be seen on x-ray images unless coated in a white liquid called barium contrast. The procedure is done by both:

- a radiologist (a doctor who uses x-rays to diagnose and treat illnesses); and
- a radiographer (a health professional that produces the images used to diagnose and treat illnesses).

The procedure uses a type of x-ray, called fluoroscopic imaging, to view images in real time.

The images are taken as you swallow the liquid and as it passes into your stomach.

The radiologist/radiographer is able to check the oesophagus and stomach and see how well the liquid moves through them.



Why should I have a barium swallow

Your doctor has referred you for this examination to help make a diagnosis or help with your treatment plans. It may be a follow-up examination or you may be having symptoms that need to be investigated.

What are the risks?

X-rays are of a type of radiation known as ionising radiation. The dose that you get from a medical x-ray is very low and the associated risks are minimal. The radiologist is responsible for making sure that your dose is kept as low as possible and that the benefits of having the examination outweigh any risk.

There are no risks associated with the barium liquid as it is not absorbed by the body. It only coats the walls of the oesophagus, stomach and bowel. For a small number of patients, there is a risk of aspiration (breathing in) of the contrast. This is unlikely but the risk increases for patients with known difficulties swallowing or a previous aspiration. In these cases a safer alternative contrast is used which is water soluble.

Female patients:

X-rays can be harmful for an unborn baby and should be avoided by women who are or may be pregnant. It is recommended that the examination is performed within 10 days of the first day of the onset of your menstrual period. If your appointment is not within this time or if you think you may be pregnant please contact the x-ray department.

Are there any alternatives?

There may be other alternative imaging available. However, this has been considered to be the most appropriate test for you. If you have any questions, please speak to the doctor that referred you or with the radiologist on the day of your examination.

How can I prepare for the examination?

It is important that your stomach is empty for this examination.

If your appointment is in the morning, please be nil by mouth from **midnight**.

If your appointment is in the afternoon, please nil by mouth from **7am**.

If you need to, you can take small sips of water or clear fluid, but avoid drinking large amounts of fluid as this will dilute the contrast and make your examination less effective. You should continue to take your prescribed medicines, which you can take with a small amount of water or clear fluid. Please arrive on time for your appointment to help us give a prompt service to everyone.

If you have diabetes

If you take tablets to control your diabetes, you should have been given a morning appointment. If you take insulin, your appointment should be at 9am. Please contact the x-ray department if this has not been done.

If you take tablets for your diabetes - miss your morning dose on the day of the examination. Bring your tablets and some food with you to take after the examination.

If you are on insulin - miss the morning dose of insulin on the day of your examination. You may need to reduce the previous evening's dose. Please bring your insulin and some food with you to take after the examination. If you take a long-acting insulin, do not stop taking it – speak to your diabetes team for advice.

Check your blood sugar regularly. If your blood sugar is below 4, then drink a small cup of sugary fluid, such as Lucozade, or have some boiled sweets.

Will I feel any pain?

The examination should not be painful. If you are concerned please tell the radiologist or radiographer

What happens after the barium swallow?

Some people feel a bit uncomfortable and bloated after barium studies. However, most people have little, if any, effects. Once you are happy to leave, you are free to do so.

What do I need to do after I go home?

You should restart your usual diet. The barium contrast may cause some constipation. To prevent this please drink plenty of fluids and eat plenty of fruit and vegetables (high in fibre).

Some people find taking a mild laxative helps – these can be bought over the counter so please ask your local pharmacist for advice. The barium can often make your stools pale for a few days – this is normal.

What should I do if I have a problem?

If you feel unwell following the examination or have any concerns, please contact your GP or the x-ray department.

Will I have a follow-up appointment?

The pictures taken during the examination are carefully studied by the radiologist, who will produce a detailed report.

The results will be sent to the doctor who referred you for the test. They will discuss the results with you and any treatment you may need.

You should already have an appointment with the team who referred you. If not, please contact them to arrange one to discuss the results of this test.

There may be students present during your consultation as part of their on-going training. Please let the staff know if you wish to be seen by a qualified professional only.

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