

Barium swallow

Patient Information Leaflet

Introduction

This leaflet tells you about a Barium Swallow. It explains how the test is done, what to expect, and the risks involved. It is not meant to replace informed discussion between you and your doctor, but can act as a starting point for such a discussion.

What is a Barium Swallow?

A Barium Swallow is an X-ray examination to assess the oesophagus (gullet) and stomach. These structures are not usually seen on X-rays. Barium, a white liquid that shows up on X-rays, is swallowed and coats the lining of the oesophagus and stomach to make them visible on the X-ray images. This makes it possible to assess the anatomy and function of the oesophagus and stomach during swallowing.

The test is commonly performed in people who have difficulty swallowing, a sensation of food being “stuck”, pain on swallowing, indigestion or for regurgitation of stomach contents (reflux).

What do I have to do before my Barium Swallow?

Dietary Restrictions and Medications

It is important that your oesophagus and stomach are empty for this examination. Therefore you will usually be asked not to eat or drink anything for at least 6 hours prior to the test.

If you are on medications please do not take these until after the test.

If you are a diabetic on insulin please inform the X-ray department at the time of making the appointment.

Females

Females are asked to contact the Radiology department if you suspect that you may be pregnant OR if the appointment is more than 10 days after the start of your last period. This test uses radiation and there is a risk to the unborn baby if we were to do the X-rays when you are pregnant. When you arrive for your test, you will be asked when your last period started. If it is more than 10 days earlier, your appointment will be postponed.

Allergy to iodine or contrast medium

You should inform us in advance if you have any known allergies.

Where do I go when I arrive at the hospital?

Please report to the reception desk in the Radiology department with your appointment letter 10 minutes before your appointment time. You will be asked to sit in the waiting area until called by a member of staff.

A member of the team will explain the test and answer any questions. If you have to undress for the procedure, you will be shown to a private cubicle and asked to change into a clean gown. You will be asked to remove all jewellery and metal from the area to be examined. Your clothes and valuables will be secured in a locker until after the procedure.

Can I bring a relative/friend?

You may bring a relative or friend with you to the appointment but, as the examination uses x-rays, for reasons of safety they will not be able to accompany you into the examination room, except in very special circumstances. If the patient is a young child or is un-cooperative, a parent or health worker may stay in the screening room, but will be required to wear a protective lead apron.

If you need an interpreter please tell us when you receive your appointment so that we can arrange this.

What happens during the Procedure?

You will be taken into the screening/fluoroscopy room and asked to stand on the step of the upright fluoroscopy table. The fluoroscopy equipment uses x-rays to obtain real-time moving images of the body. A small beam of continuous x-rays passes through the body to an image intensifier, which is suspended over the X-ray table. The sequence of images produced can be viewed on a computer monitor.

The procedure will be performed by a Radiologist, who is a doctor specially trained to carry out complex imaging examinations and to interpret the images. The Radiologist is helped by a Radiographer, who is a professional trained to carry out X-rays and other imaging examinations.

You will be asked to drink barium (white X-ray contrast) whilst the Radiologist watches and records pictures of your oesophagus and stomach on a computer monitor. You may be asked to stand in different positions whilst the images are taken. The exam table will be positioned at different angles to record images whilst you are standing and lying down.

The examination takes about 15 minutes to complete.

What happens after the test?

At the end of the test you will be able to leave immediately. You can eat and drink normally and take your normal medications.

You should drink plenty of fluid for the remainder of the day to flush the Barium through your system. Your stools may appear pale for 2-3 days after the procedure.

Are there any risks?

Fluoroscopy involves the use of X-rays. There are strict guidelines in place for the use of x-rays in diagnosing medical conditions so fluoroscopic examinations can only be performed at the request of a Doctor. We will keep the radiation dose as low as we possibly can. Women who are or might be pregnant must inform a member of staff in advance.

Barium is not absorbed into the blood and allergic reactions are extremely rare.

Despite these slight risks, your doctor believes it is advisable that you should have this examination, and do bear in mind there are greater risks from missing a serious disorder by not having your scan.

How do I get my results?

The Radiologist will review the images from your Barium Swallow and send a report to your doctor. Your GP or hospital Consultant who referred you for the test will see you to discuss the results.

In some cases the Radiologist may discuss the findings with you at the end of the procedure.

Any further questions?

We will do our best to make your visit as comfortable and stress free as possible. If you have any further questions, or suggestions for us, please let us know. If you would prefer information and advice in another language, please contact the Radiology department.

Further Information

For general information about Radiology departments, visit The Royal College of Radiologists' website: www.goingfora.com

For information about the effects of x-rays read the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) publication: 'X-rays how safe are they?' on the website: http://www.hpa.org.uk/webc/HPAwebFile/HPAweb_C/1194947388410

For health advice or information you can call NHS Direct on 0845 4647 or visit the website: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

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