



Barium swallow/meal examination

Your doctor has referred you for a barium swallow/meal examination. The information in this leaflet should explain what will happen before, during, and after the test and also answer any questions that you might have.

What is a barium swallow/meal?

A barium swallow is an X-ray examination of your throat and oesophagus (gullet). A barium meal is an X-ray examination of your stomach. Both tests may be done at the same time. The gullet and stomach do not show up well on ordinary X-rays. However, if the lining of the gullet or stomach is coated with barium, a white chalky liquid that does show up well on X-rays, it can be seen in much greater detail.

Before your barium swallow/meal

Your stomach should be empty before the procedure. Follow the instructions on your appointment letter carefully. The letter will tell you how long before the test you should stop eating and drinking.

If you are pregnant, or think you may be, please inform us as soon as possible as this test may not be appropriate. If you suffer from diabetes, you must also let us know. You will find our telephone number on your appointment letter.

What will happen during the test?

The examination will be explained to you by the radiologist (X-ray doctor) or radiographer and you will have the opportunity to ask any questions that you may have. There will normally be 2 or 3 people in the X-ray room during your test. The X-ray table will be in an upright position at the start of the examination and you will have to stand in front of it on a small step. You may be given some granules to swallow. These will temporarily enlarge your stomach and make you feel as though you have had a fizzy drink. In order to prevent your stomach moving during the test, you may be given an injection into a vein in your elbow or hand, although this is not always necessary. You will then be asked to drink a few mouthfuls of a chalky white liquid (barium). This coats the lining of the gullet and stomach and shows up on the X-ray images. The X-ray table may be tilted so that you are lying down. You will be asked to turn into different positions and further X-ray images of your stomach will be taken.

After the barium swallow/meal

You will be able to leave the department as soon as your examination is finished. You will be able to eat and drink normally. The injection to relax your stomach can sometimes give you blurred vision for up to 30 minutes. If this happens, you should not drive until this has settled.

When will I get the results?

You will not normally be given the results on the day of the examination. A radiologist (a doctor who is specially trained to interpret X-ray images) will write a report on the findings and these will be sent back to the doctor that referred you. Your doctor should have the results in around 7-10 days.

Are there any risks?

All X-ray procedures involve exposure to ionising radiation in varying amounts. The use of radiation is strictly controlled and is kept to the minimum required. For this examination, the extra radiation is equivalent to what you would receive from the atmosphere (background radiation) over a period of 12 to 14 months.

Very occasionally, some patients may inhale (breathe in) a small amount of barium. If this happens, you may need to stay in the department for a short time after your test so that this can be cleared, usually by vigorous coughing.

Barium swallow/meal examination (continued)

During the examination, you may be required to have an injection. This is given to prevent your stomach moving. It will not make you sleepy or drowsy. However, it may result in blurred vision for up to 30 minutes. If this happens, you should not drive until your vision has returned to normal. Occasionally patients may develop a red or painful eye. This can happen in patients who have glaucoma, in which case the injection would not normally be given. However, it could arise in patients who have undiagnosed glaucoma. If this occurs, you should seek medical advice from your nearest Accident & Emergency Department immediately.

As with any procedure, unforeseen complications can occur, although this is very rare. Despite these risks, it is important to remember that the risk of missing a serious problem by not having the test done could be much greater.

Commonly asked questions

How long does it take?

Usually between 5 and 15 minutes.

What is the injection for?

The injection is to keep your stomach still during a barium meal examination. You may not need it if you are just having a barium swallow (to look at the gullet). It does not make you sleepy or drowsy.

Is the test painful?

You may feel some discomfort if you are given the injection, similar to what you would feel if having a blood test. You may also feel a bit bloated due to extra air in your stomach if you are given the fizzy granules.

Can I bring someone with me?

You can bring someone with you but they will not be allowed to come into the X-ray room with you.

Can I return to work after the test?

Yes. You can eat and drink normally after the test and return to your normal daily routine.

If you have any questions or concerns that are not covered by this leaflet, please contact the Medical Imaging Department on the telephone number given on your appointment letter. We will do our best to make your visit as pleasant as possible.