

Information for the patient on barium swallow and meal

Most facilities will provide a local information sheet and this information should be considered in conjunction with that.

A barium swallow ('upper GI series') is a special x-ray examination of the oesophagus (gullet), the stomach and small intestine. You will be given a drink of a liquid which will outline the gullet and stomach to show them up clearly on x-ray films. The examination usually takes about 30 min although can be up to 1-2 hours if the small bowel is also assessed.

A plain x-ray gives minimal detail about the inside of the bowel. Standard x-rays show bony structures well and give less detail about soft tissues and hollow organs such as the intestine, therefore you will be asked to swallow a liquid that does show up on x-rays (barium). The barium will temporarily coat the inside lining of the oesophagus, stomach, and intestine, allowing the outline of these organs to be visible on the x-ray pictures. A barium swallow can therefore be helpful in diagnosing cancers, ulcers, problems that cause narrowing of the oesophagus, some causes of inflammation in the intestine, and some swallowing problems.

Preparation

What is required for preparation will be explained to you by the unit you attend. In general,

- You must fast (not eat or drink) for 8 hours prior to the procedure.
- If you are on medication, do not take the morning dose.

The procedure

- The examination is conducted by a radiologist (a doctor specialising in medical diagnosis by x-ray) and a radiographer (a technician trained in the use of medical x-ray equipment).
- Before the examination, you may be given an injection to relax your muscles.
- After this, you may be given a mixture to swallow to form gas in the stomach. Swallow quickly to prevent foaming in the mouth and try not to belch.
- Next, you will be given Barium sulphate liquid to drink. This, together with the gas will outline the stomach clearly. You may feel a sense of distension and discomfort, but this should quickly pass.
- A special X-ray tube (fluoroscope) is connected to a television monitor. As you drink, the doctor will observe the filling of the gullet and stomach through the x-ray TV screen. You will be filmed in various positions including lying down.
- Films will be taken in the best positions for diagnosis.

- Sometimes, the examination may be extended to parts of the small intestine. This procedure is known as the Barium Meal Follow - Through examination and may take a further 1 to 2 hours (this allows time for the barium to reach your small intestine).

After the procedure

- You may have food and drink after the examination.
- You should drink plenty of fluids to avoid constipation.
- Your faeces may appear white in colour for a few days. Do not be alarmed as this is due to the residual barium in your bowels.

Risks and Potential Complications

- Barium swallow and meal are very safe procedures and complications are extremely rare. Despite some discomfort during the procedure most people tolerate it very well.
- After the examination your bowel will expel the barium, which is not absorbed by your body. Barium liquid may cause constipation. Following the examination you should eat foods high in fibre and drink plenty of fluids to help expel the barium from the body. Your faeces (stool) will have a whitish colour to it until the barium has all been passed. You may be required to take a mild laxative.
- X-ray procedures should be avoided wherever possible during pregnancy. If you are, or suspect you might be, pregnant, please make sure that the doctors, nurses and /or technicians caring for you know this before you have a barium meal / swallow examination.