

Barium Meal

Your doctor has recommended that you have a barium meal. The reason for this will depend on your condition; your doctor will talk to you about your options. This leaflet explains the procedure and aims to answer the main questions you're likely to have. If you have any additional questions then please feel free to talk about them with your doctor, nurse or radiographer before the procedure.

What is a barium meal?

A barium meal is type of X-ray test that allows your doctor to examine your oesophagus (the pipe that goes from your mouth to your stomach), stomach and the duodenum (first part of your bowel). These structures are not usually visible under X-rays. Therefore, require enhancement, which is provided by drinking barium, a white thick liquid that coats the gut wall.

A barium meal can help work out why you're having symptoms such as:

- difficult or painful swallowing
- heartburn or reflux (solids and liquids moving back up the oesophagus to the mouth)
- vomiting
- indigestion or abdominal pain
- anaemia

The tests give your doctor information about your stomach and can pick up patches of irritation such as ulcers, abnormal growths, narrowing or a blockage.

What are the alternatives?

One alternative to a barium meal is to have a gastroscopy. This looks at the first part of your digestive system, from your throat to the start of your small intestine. It uses a narrow, flexible, tube-like telescopic camera called a gastroscope. Other alternatives include magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computed tomography (CT) scans.

Preparing for your barium meal

Your stomach and small bowel need to be empty for this test. Apart from a small sip of water with any medicines you usually take, you must not eat or drink for about six hours before the test. If you have diabetes, you should contact us before your appointment. If your diabetes is controlled by your diet, make sure you book a morning appointment. If you take tablets or insulin for your diabetes, contact us for more advice.

If you usually take medication (for example, tablets for blood pressure), continue to take these as prescribed unless your doctor specifically tells you not to. If you are unsure about your medication, contact your doctor.

Please tell the doctor or radiographer:

- about any medicines you're taking
- if you have any allergies, glaucoma or heart disease

- if you are, or think you could be, pregnant - a barium meal isn't recommended for pregnant women, unless there is an urgent medical reason

Before your test you will be shown to a private cubicle where you can remove your clothes and put on a hospital gown. You will then be taken to the X-ray room.

About the procedure

The procedure will usually be carried out by a radiologist (a doctor who specialises in using imaging methods to diagnose medical conditions). A radiographer (a healthcare professional trained to perform imaging procedures) may also be present. Your radiographer will explain the procedure and make sure that you're happy to go ahead with the test.

At the beginning of the test you may be asked to swallow a dessert spoon of granules followed by a dessert spoon of liquid. The granules dissolve in your stomach and produce bubbles of gas. Having liquid and gas inside your stomach gives useful X-ray images of the stomach wall. At this stage you should try not to burp. You will then be asked to stand on an upright X-ray table and the X-ray machine will be moved into the correct place. You will be given a cup of barium to drink. The liquid is mildly vanilla-flavoured and you will be asked to sip one or two mouthfuls at a time. You will also need to hold a mouthful of barium and swallow when asked to do so. You may be given an injection of a muscle relaxant to help relax the muscles of the stomach wall and stop your stomach from moving. Once your stomach has been studied and X-rays taken, the table will slowly tilt so that you're lying down and more X-rays will be taken. You may have to drink more barium and move into different positions so your organs can be seen clearly.

The test usually takes 15 to 30 minutes, but altogether you will be in the radiology department for approximately one hour.

What to expect afterwards

When you feel ready, you will be able to go home. If you were given a muscle relaxant, you should wait for one hour before driving. It's best to arrange for someone to drive you home. Once home, drink clear fluids regularly and try to eat vegetables, fruit and high-fibre foods. This helps to maintain regular bowel movement and prevent you becoming constipated. You may find that your stools are white because of the barium. This should only last for a few days.

Getting your results

The results will usually be available within 24 hours and will be sent directly to the doctor who requested your test.

What are the risks?

Barium meal tests are commonly performed and generally safe.

You will be exposed to some X-ray radiation, but the amount you receive isn't considered to be harmful. Pregnant women are advised not to have X-rays as there's a risk the radiation may harm the unborn baby. If you are, or could be, pregnant then please tell your doctor or radiographer.

Complications are rare but it's possible to have an allergic reaction to the flavouring added to some brands of barium drink. If you experience any itching or difficulty in breathing, tell your radiographer immediately. Medicines are available to treat any allergic reaction. Ask your doctor to explain how these risks apply to you. The exact risks will differ for each person.

Side-effects

After having a barium meal you may feel bloated for a short while. You may also feel constipated for a few days and need to take a mild laxative. You can buy these over the counter at a pharmacy. Always read the patient information leaflet that comes with your medicine and if you have any questions, ask your pharmacist for advice.

The muscle relaxant used during a barium meal can temporarily blur your eyesight, give you a dry mouth and make it harder than usual to pass urine. These effects usually wear off after about 15 to 30 minutes.

Contact

If you have any questions or need further information, please contact the Diagnostic Imaging department on +44 (0)20 7460 5746/7 or fax +44 (0)20 7835 2496. The department is open from 8.00am to 8.00pm, Monday to Friday and 9.00am to 2.00pm on Saturday.

Please be punctual for your appointment. If you cannot keep your appointment then contact us immediately.

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