

Radiology Department

Barium Swallow Examination

Information for patients



Barium Swallow examination

The X-ray department has received a request for you to have a Barium Swallow examination. This leaflet tells you the purpose of the examination, what's involved and what the risks are. We will also send you an appointment letter which will tell you where to go for your appointment.

- If you cannot attend your appointment, please let us know as soon as possible. Please telephone us on the number on the front of your appointment letter.
- If you are **diabetic**, please telephone us as soon as possible as we may need to send you additional information about your appointment.
- If you are female and of childbearing age, i.e. up to 55 years of age, we will ask you to complete a form asking about the dates of your periods. (You may already have done this.) This is because the examination should usually only be performed when we can be sure that you are not pregnant. Please complete and return this form as soon as possible so that we can give you an appropriate appointment date.
- If you weigh more than 146 kg or 23 stone, please tell us immediately.

If you need hospital transport to reach the hospital, please tell us as soon as possible.

What is a Barium Swallow examination?

This is an X-ray examination that looks at your gullet (the tube that leads to your stomach). We will ask you to drink a chalky white liquid called barium, which shows up on the X-rays. We take X ray pictures as you swallow the barium. The purpose of the test is to try to find out what may be causing your symptoms (e.g. difficulty in swallowing). We may give you an injection during the test to relax your stomach.

Can I bring a relative or friend?

Yes, but for reasons of safety they will not be able to accompany you into the X-ray room except in very special circumstances.

Are there any risks?

- Exposure to radiation: This is a low dose examination and the amount of radiation is kept to a minimum. This is equivalent to the amount of background radiation that you naturally receive over 3-4 months.
- Very rarely, a little bit of the barium liquid goes down the wrong way, into the airway. Sometimes we may need to organise some physiotherapy to help you cough this back up.
- There is a slight risk from the Buscopan injection (to relax the stomach) to patients who have glaucoma or heart rhythm problems. We will ask if you have heart disease or glaucoma before giving you the injection.

Your doctor has recommended this examination because he/she feels that the benefits are greater than the risk of not having the examination. Even so, this test cannot be guaranteed to detect all abnormalities in the gullet.

What happens at home before the examination?

In order for the doctor to see your gullet clearly, it needs to be empty. **Please stop taking white or pink stomach medicine (which coats the stomach wall, e.g. Gaviscon) three days before the X-ray.** All other medication can be taken as normal up to the night before your appointment.

Please have no food, drink or tablets for 6 hours before the time of your appointment. You may have **small sips of water** up to 2 hours before your appointment, then nothing at all for the last 2 hours. Your tablets can be brought with you to have as soon as your examination is completed.

What happens during the examination?

The procedure usually lasts about 20 minutes but you may be at the hospital longer if we need to see emergency patients.

You will be asked to change into a hospital gown to make sure that no metal coins/objects or bra straps are seen on the pictures.

We will ask you to lie down on an X-ray table, and then drink some liquid barium through a straw while you are in this position. A variety of pictures will be taken in different positions as you are swallowing the liquid. The table will also be moved into the upright position and more pictures will be taken with you drinking barium while you are standing up.

Side effects and what happens after the examination

- **Drink plenty of fluids (several glasses of water each day to quench thirst).** The barium will make your motions whitish for the next few days and can give you constipation. Therefore, keep drinking extra fluids until your stools are no longer whiter than your normal. It is important to wash away the barium inside your bowel so that it does not harden inside you and cause constipation or even block the toilet!
- Eating a high fibre diet like bran or wholemeal bread can help but the main thing is to drink plenty.
- If you have problems with your heart or with water retention, you may not be able to drink this much safely. If in doubt, or if you find you become breathless or your legs swell up, contact your GP.
- The injection given may blur your eyesight over the next few hours. **Do not drive or operate dangerous machinery until you are sure your eyesight is back to normal.**
- Very rarely, in people who are already at risk of glaucoma, the injection can cause a very painful red eye. **If this happens you should call your GP as an emergency.**

When and how will I know the result of the examination?

The pictures of your gullet will be examined by the radiologist, who will then send a report of the results to the person who referred you.

- If your GP referred you the report is sent to him or her and you can make an appointment to see them 10 days later.
- If a doctor/consultant from the outpatient department referred you then the result will be sent out in time for your next outpatient appointment. If you do not yet have another outpatient appointment, and do not hear anything within three weeks, you should telephone the consultant's secretary for advice.

Questions or concerns

If you have any questions you can telephone us on the number on the front of your appointment letter.

Further information

Further information can be found on the following websites:

www.rcr.ac.uk (Royal College of Radiologists)

www.oxfordradcliffe.nhs.uk/forpatients/departments/departments.aspx

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

If you need an interpreter or need a document
in another language, large print, Braille or
audio version, please call **01865 221473** or
email **PALSJR@orh.nhs.uk**

Carol Picking, Gastrointestinal Advanced Practitioner
Dr Helen Bungay, Gastrointestinal Consultant Radiologist
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Oxford Radcliffe Hospitals NHS Trust
Oxford OX3 9DU

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