



Having a barium swallow / meal

This leaflet explains what happens during a barium swallow / meal examination in the Radiology (X-ray) Department at the Royal Berkshire Hospital. The examination is conducted by a radiologist (specialist X-ray doctor) or a specialist radiographer (X-ray professional).

What is a barium swallow / meal?

A barium swallow / meal is a test designed to look at your oesophagus (gullet – the tube leading from your mouth to your stomach).

Why do I need this test?

Your referring doctor should have explained why you need this test to you. It may be because you have problems swallowing or suffer from heartburn / indigestion.

How long will it take?

The investigation takes about 10 to 20 minutes, although we may ask you to stay longer if additional X-rays are required.

Do I need to prepare for it?

You must have nothing to eat for 4 hours before your appointment, but you may continue to drink fluids until 2 hours before your appointment. Please bring your appointment letter and a dressing gown with you (or a gown can be provided).

If you weigh over 20 stone / 127kg, please contact us beforehand by telephoning 0118 322 7991.

What does it involve?

We may ask you to change into a gown before the test. During the examination, we will ask you to swallow some barium liquid; it is this liquid that shows up on the X-ray monitor. We may also ask you to swallow some fizzy granules with a small quantity of bitter liquid. This makes a harmless gas in the stomach. The radiologist or specialist radiographer will be taking X-ray images throughout. It is not a painful procedure.

After the barium swallow / meal

You will be able to eat and drink as normal. Barium can cause constipation, so please drink plenty of fluids and eat more fibre for a few days after the test to avoid this.

You can drive home after the examination, as barium does not affect your abilities.

Results

A report of your examination will be sent to your referring doctor; if this is a hospital specialist, then the specialist will contact your GP with the report.

Are there any risks with this test?

This test involves X-rays. The amount of radiation is kept to a minimum and is equivalent to the amount of background radiation you naturally receive over 3-5 weeks.

Barium can constipate you and we advise you to drink plenty of fluids after the test to wash the barium out of your system. Your stools (poo) may appear slightly whitish, but this is the barium passing through.

Barium is not absorbed by the body and so it is very rare for an allergic reaction to occur with a barium test.

This test should not be performed if there is any chance you might be pregnant as radiation is potentially harmful to the baby.

Further information

www.patient.co.uk/health/Barium-Swallow-/-Meal-/-Follow-Through.htm

Radiology Department Tel 0118 322 7991

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

RAD_0039

Radiology Department, January 2025

Next review due: January 2027