Having a barium swallow examination

A barium swallow is an examination of your oesophagus (or gullet); the tube between your mouth and stomach. You will be asked to drink a liquid that is visible on x-ray to see what happens when you swallow.

Preparation for the test

Please do not eat or drink for six hours before the examination.

If you are diabetic please note your appointment time. It should be between 9am and 10am. If it is not, please contact us to change it. Do not take your medicine for diabetes on the morning of the test. Bring it with you as well as something to eat so you can take it immediately after the test.

If you are female and of childbearing age (12 to 55) you will be asked to complete a form about the date of your last period and whether there is any possibility you may be pregnant. This is because this examination should only be performed when we can be sure that you are not pregnant.

Please let us know as soon as possible if you have problems standing or transferring from a wheelchair.

You should also let us know if you have any previous allergic reactions to iodine or x-ray contrast.

What to bring

For your personal comfort, you may wish to bring your own dressing gown, slippers and reading material.

During the test

The test will be performed by a doctor (radiologist) or a radiographer specialising in these examinations.

You will be asked to change into a hospital gown to ensure no clothing or other objects are visible on the pictures.

Most people will be asked to swallow a small amount of powder that creates gas, so the oesophagus can be seen more clearly.

You will then be asked to stand on a small platform by the x-ray machine and asked to swallow mouthfuls of the liquid while x-rays are taken. Most people drink a thick liquid called barium but sometimes a thinner liquid will be used.

Some people will also be asked to chew and swallow a marshmallow coated in barium.
The table will then be tilted so you are lying down and more images can be taken. You may be asked to lie on your front and drink some more barium.

When enough pictures have been taken, the examination is complete.

The test normally takes about 15 minutes.

**After the test**

You can resume your regular diet and try to drink plenty of fluids. Your bowel motions may be pale in colour for a short period due to the barium.

**Risks**

Exposure to radiation: this is a low dose examination and the dose is kept to a minimum. Aspiration: there is a small risk that some of the barium goes the wrong way into your lungs. This does not usually cause problems but, in a small number of people, chest physiotherapy may be necessary.

**Results**

A radiologist will examine the pictures and we will send a report to the doctor who requested the procedure. If this was your GP, you can make an appointment to see him/her ten days after the test. If it was a doctor/consultant from the outpatient department, the result should be available in time for your next appointment. If you have not heard anything within three weeks, you should contact the consultant’s secretary.

**Further information**

Some of your questions should have been answered in this factsheet, but remember that this is only a starting point for discussion about your treatment with the doctors looking after you. Make sure you are satisfied that you have received enough information about the procedure. If you have any questions before the examination please phone the radiology department on 023 8079 6081.