

## Patient information factsheet

# Having a barium swallow examination

This factsheet will give you information about having a barium swallow examination. We hope it will answer some of the questions you may have but, if there is anything you don't understand, a member of your healthcare team will be happy to explain further.

### What is a barium swallow?

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.

The procedure will take place in the radiology department and usually takes approximately 15 minutes.

### Preparation for the test

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

If you are on medication for diabetes, please contact your diabetic nurse for specific instructions. If needed, your appointment time can be changed to suit you.

If you are female and of childbearing capacity, you will be asked to complete a form with 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 in advance if you have problems standing or transferring from a wheelchair so that we can make arrangements.

You should also let us know if you have had any previous reactions to iodine or x-ray contrast (a liquid that is visible on x-ray). Our telephone number is over the page.

### What to bring with you

You might wish to bring your own dressing gown, slippers and reading material.

### During the procedure

The procedure will be performed by a radiologist (a doctor who uses x-rays to diagnose illnesses) or a radiographer specialising in these examinations.

You will be asked to change into a hospital gown before being taken to the examination room.

You may be asked to swallow a small amount of powder that creates gas, so that 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.

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### After the procedure

No special care is necessary after the procedure and you can return to your usual daily activities. Try to drink plenty of fluids.

Your bowel motions may be pale in colour for a short period due to the barium.

### Risks

#### *Radiation*

There is some exposure to radiation during the procedure because x-rays are used. However, as this is a low dose examination, exposure to radiation is kept to a minimum. Generally, the amount of radiation you are exposed to during this procedure is equivalent to between a few days and a few years of exposure to natural radiation from the environment.

#### *Aspiration*

There is a small risk that some of the barium goes the wrong way into your lungs. This does not usually cause any problems but, for a small number of people, chest physiotherapy may be necessary.

### Results

The pictures will be examined and a report sent to the doctor who requested the procedure.

If you were referred by a consultant at the hospital, this report should be available at your outpatient follow up. If you were referred by your GP, you should have heard from the surgery within three weeks of your examination. If you have not been contacted, you should check that your GP has received your results and make an appointment.

### 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.

It is important that you are satisfied that you have received enough information about the procedure. If you have any questions before or after the examination please telephone the radiology department on 023 8120 6079 from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

### Useful links

NHS Choices [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.