

## Patient information factsheet

# Having a barium swallow examination

We have given you this factsheet because you have been referred for a barium swallow examination. This factsheet explains what a barium swallow examination is and what will happen at your appointment so that you know what to expect. We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact us using the details at the end of this factsheet.

### What is a barium swallow?

A barium swallow is a type of x-ray examination (a procedure that uses radiation to produce images of the inside of the body) that looks at your oesophagus (the tube between your mouth and stomach, also known as the food pipe). During the examination, we will ask you to drink a liquid that is visible on x-ray to see what happens when you swallow.

The examination will take place in our radiology department and will take approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

### Preparation for the examination

#### Eating and drinking

Do not eat or drink anything for **four** hours before the examination. However, if you need to take any of your usual medications, you may take these with a small amount of water.

#### If you have diabetes

If you are on medication for diabetes, contact your diabetic nurse for specific instructions. If needed, you can change your appointment time to a time that is more suitable for you (for example, a morning appointment) by calling our admin team on the telephone number provided at the end of this factsheet.

It is important that you keep your blood sugar levels under control for this test. If you are unsure how to do this, contact your diabetes team for advice.

#### Allergies

Please contact us as soon as possible if you have:

- had any previous reactions to iodine or x-ray contrast (a liquid visible on x-rays) in the past
- any known allergies or dietary requirements (for example, vegan or halal)

#### Pregnancy

This examination involves the use of ionising radiation (x-rays) which although considered safe for you, may be harmful to an unborn baby. As such, we have a legal obligation to check if there is any chance that you may be pregnant. We have to ask this question to anyone who has the potential to become pregnant, regardless of age or circumstances. If you are or think that you may be pregnant, please contact us before your appointment.

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## Additional support

Please let us know as soon as you receive your appointment letter if you have problems standing or transferring from a wheelchair so that we can make arrangements for you. We have a specialist x-ray chair we can use if you are unable to stand for long periods of time.

If you have any personal health concerns which you feel may affect your safety in the department, or if you think you may need assistance, please let us know when you arrive.

## Clothing

Some clothes can affect the quality of the x-ray images, so please be aware that we may ask you to change into a hospital gown.

Please remove all jewellery before you come into hospital.

## During the examination

The examination will be performed by either a radiographer who specialises in barium swallow examinations or a radiologist (a doctor who uses x-rays to diagnose illnesses).

We will ask you a few questions about your symptoms and if you have had any previous surgery to your oesophagus or stomach. We will then explain what will happen during the examination and give you some instructions that you will need to follow. Don't worry if you can't remember the instructions as we will take you through these step by step during the examination. This is a good opportunity for you to ask any questions you may have.

We may then ask you to swallow a small amount of powder that creates gas. This will help us to see your oesophagus and stomach more clearly. We will then ask you to stand on a small platform (if you are able to) by the x-ray machine and swallow comfortable mouthfuls of a liquid that is visible on x-ray. Most people will drink a thick, white liquid called barium sulphate which tastes sweet and has a chalky consistency similar to Gaviscon, but sometimes a thinner, clearer liquid will be used. As you drink the liquid, we will take a number of x-ray images and videos. Please note that we will need to move you into a number of different positions to assess your oesophagus at different angles.

We may ask some people to chew and swallow a marshmallow coated in barium. If you have specific dietary requirements or allergies and this isn't suitable, please let us know and we will provide a suitable alternative.

We may then ask you to lie on the x-ray table on your front. We will ask you to drink some more barium as we tilt the table and take some more images. If this isn't possible, we may need to take the images in a different way. We will explain this to you in more detail if applicable.

When we have taken enough images, the examination will be complete.

## After the examination

No special care is necessary after the examination. You can return to your usual daily activities and you can also eat and drink as normal.

Barium can cause constipation (not being able to poo as often or finding it hard to poo) so it is important that you drink plenty of water after the examination. Don't be alarmed if your stools (poo) are white or pale in colour for a few days.

## Risks

### Radiation

You will be exposed to some radiation during the examination. However, the risk is low, and the amount of radiation you will receive will be kept to a minimum (equal to the natural radiation we all receive from our surroundings over a period of approximately one to five years). Your doctor believes the benefits of this examination outweigh the risks.

### Aspiration

There is a small risk that some of the barium can go the wrong way and into your lungs. While this does not usually cause any problems, a small number of people may need further treatment. If this happens, we will advise you what the next steps are.

## Results

We will not be able to provide you with any results or feedback on the day of your examination. We will examine the x-ray images and then send a report to the doctor who referred you for the examination.

If you were referred by a consultant at the hospital, this report should be available at your outpatient follow-up appointment. If you were referred by your general practitioner (GP), you should hear from them within three weeks of your examination. If you have not heard anything after three weeks, you should contact your GP to see if they have received your results.

## Further information

If you are arriving by car, please be advised that our car parks can get very busy, so it's a good idea to allow plenty of time to find a space. You may wish to consider getting a lift or coming by public transport.

If you have a medical condition that means you need help getting to and from the hospital, please contact the patient transport service directly on **0300 123 9833**.

## Contact us

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.

If you have any questions before or after your examination, please contact us.

Radiology department

Telephone: **023 8120 6079** (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm)

If you are unsure why you need this examination, please speak to the doctor or clinical team who referred you.

## Useful links

[www.uhs.nhs.uk/for-visitors/southampton-general-hospital/getting-here](http://www.uhs.nhs.uk/for-visitors/southampton-general-hospital/getting-here)

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **[www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport](http://www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport)**

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