



**The Leeds  
Teaching Hospitals**  
NHS Trust

# Having a barium meal/swallow

Information for patients



**Leeds**  
Radiology

## What is a barium meal / swallow?

**A barium swallow** is an x-ray examination to demonstrate the oesophagus (food pipe).

**A barium meal** is an x-ray examination to demonstrate the stomach and the first part of the small intestine (duodenum).

At the beginning of the test you may be asked to swallow some granules along with a lemon flavoured liquid, which will fizz up to produce gas in your stomach. A small injection (Buscopan) may be given into your arm to relax the muscles in your stomach. You will be asked to drink a cup of barium, a chalky liquid, which shows up on x-ray. X-rays will be taken from different angles whilst you stand against then lie on the x-ray table. Trained staff will assist you if necessary throughout the procedure.

## Who performs the test?

The test is performed by a team of healthcare professionals which may include a radiographer, an advanced radiographer practitioner/specialist radiographer, an assistant and a radiologist.

## How do I prepare for the test?

Do not stop taking vital medicines (heart drugs, steroids, diuretics / water tablets etc.). In order to visualise the oesophagus, stomach or duodenum it is important that the stomach is completely empty so you are asked to fast:

**HAVE NOTHING TO EAT OR DRINK  
for SIX HOURS before the examination.**

### ***Important note for patients with diabetes:***

If you have an early morning appointment bring your morning medication and a snack with you.

If you have an afternoon appointment eat breakfast and take your morning medication at least 6 hours before your appointment and bring a snack and any afternoon medications with you.

Please telephone the department if you have any questions.

## **What should I bring with me?**

You will be required to change into a gown for this examination. We will provide you with a gown, but you may wish to bring your own dressing gown. Please do not bring large sums of money or items of value with you. Unfortunately we are unable to provide any childcare so please make alternative arrangements if necessary.

## **How long will I be in the department?**

Allow up to an hour for your examination. Although we try to keep to your appointment time, occasionally there may be a delay due to emergency patients.

## **Are there any side-effects?**

### ***Radiation***

This procedure involves x-rays. Female patients who are, or might be pregnant must inform a member of staff in advance. The amount of radiation used is more than an ordinary x-ray of the chest or body and is equal to the natural radiation we receive from the atmosphere over a period of approximately two years. The risk from this radiation dose is very low.

### ***Aspiration***

Sometimes when we swallow some of what we swallow goes into our lungs. If this happens to you in daily life then it may also happen when you swallow the x-ray dye. If a lot of the x-ray dye does go into your lungs we will make sure you cough most of it up before you leave the department. The risk of becoming unwell because of this is very small.

### ***Allergic reaction***

Some patients may be allergic to the x-ray dye or medicines we give you. This is very rare. If you have any allergies please tell the member of staff who is performing your examination, at the start of the examination.

## Do you ever fail to complete the examination?

This is a safe examination that is usually successful. If, for any reason, we are unable to perform the examination we will inform your doctor who will discuss the alternatives with you. Despite these small risks your doctor believes it is beneficial for you to have this examination. Do bear in mind that there are greater risks from missing a serious disorder by not having the examination.

## How will I feel following the test?

You will be able to eat, drink and resume normal activities immediately. The barium can have a constipating effect so you are advised to drink plenty of fluids over the following few days to keep you hydrated.

If you had the injection (Buscopan) it can make your mouth dry and your vision slightly blurred, which normally lasts 15-20 minutes.

Very rarely patients may develop pain or redness of the eyes which occurs in the 24 hours after the test. If this happens, you should go to an Accident and Emergency department immediately for a check up. Take this leaflet with you.

*Please remember this is very rare.*

## How will I get my results?

You will not be given your results on the day. The results will be sent to your GP (if they referred you for the test. If so you must make an appointment to see them). If you have been referred by a hospital consultant / specialist then you will be sent an appointment to attend the relevant clinic or contacted by letter with the results.

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