

Having a barium follow-through examination

This leaflet aims to answer your questions about having a barium follow-through examination. It explains the benefits, risks and alternatives, as well as how to prepare for your test and what to expect when you come to hospital. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is a barium follow-through?

A barium follow-through is an examination of your stomach and small bowel. These parts of your body cannot normally be seen on x-ray images unless coated in a white liquid called barium contrast. The procedure is done by both:

- a radiologist (a doctor who uses x-rays to diagnose and treat illnesses), and
- a radiographer (a health professional who produces the images used to diagnose and treat illnesses).

A series of pictures is taken of your stomach and small bowel over a period of time. You may have an x-ray about every 30 minutes until the barium contrast has passed through your entire small bowel and into your large bowel (colon). The procedure also uses a type of x-ray, called fluoroscopic imaging, to view images in real time. This makes it possible to see the stomach and bowel working in your body. When the bowel is coated with the barium contrast, the radiologist is able to check how they look and how well they are functioning.

What happens during a barium follow-through?

You will be asked to change into a hospital gown. You may also be asked to remove jewellery, dentures, glasses, and any metal objects or clothing that might interfere with the x-ray images.

Please tell the radiologist about any medicines you are taking, severe allergies, recent illnesses or other medical conditions.

We will ask you to drink the barium contrast before the examination begins. Shortly after this, you will be brought into the x-ray room and the radiographer will take an x-ray image of your abdomen (tummy). A series of x-ray images will be taken over a period of time as the barium contrast moves through your digestive system. This can take a while, usually between one and four hours.

Once the barium contrast has reached the large bowel you will be brought into the fluoroscopy room. The radiologist will then take images of your abdomen. You may be repositioned often in order to get pictures from several angles. The x-ray equipment may also move in order to get the best possible pictures. The radiologist and radiographer will be there with you at all times to help you.

Please allow at least five hours for the whole examination, as the time it takes for the barium to reach the desired place in the bowel is different for everyone. You may want bring a book with you to pass the time between x-rays.

Why should I have a barium follow-through?

This may be a follow-up examination or you may be having symptoms. Your doctor has referred you for this examination to help make a diagnosis or to help with your treatment plans.

What are the risks?

X-rays are of a type of radiation known as ionising radiation. The dose that you get from a medical x-ray is very low and the associated risks are minimal. The radiographer is responsible for ensuring that your dose is kept as low as possible and that the benefits of having the examination outweigh any risk.

There are no risks associated with the barium liquid as it is not absorbed by the body. It only coats the walls of the stomach and bowel.

Female patients

X-rays can be harmful for an unborn baby and should be avoided by women who are or may be pregnant. It is recommended that the examination is performed within 10 days of the first day/onset of your menstrual period. If your appointment is not within this time or if you think you may be pregnant, please contact the X-ray Department.

Are there any alternatives?

There may be alternative imaging available. However, this has been considered to be the most appropriate test for you. If you have any questions please speak to the doctor who referred you, or to the radiologist on the day of your examination.

How can I prepare for the examination?

It is important that your stomach and small bowel are empty for this examination. **Do not eat or drink anything after midnight on the night before your examination.** If you need to, you can take small sips of water or clear fluid, but avoid drinking large amounts of fluid as this will dilute the barium contrast and make your examination less effective.

You should continue taking your usual medication, which you can take with a small amount of water or clear fluid.

Please arrive on time for your appointment to help us give a prompt service to everyone.

If you have diabetes

If you take tablets to control your diabetes, you should be given a morning appointment. If you take insulin, your appointment should be at 9am. Please contact the X-ray Department if this has not been arranged so that we can change your appointment time.

If you take tablets for your diabetes – miss your morning dose on the day of the examination. Bring your tablets and some food with you to take after the examination.

If you are on insulin – miss the morning dose of insulin on the day of your examination. You may need to reduce the previous evening's dose. Please bring your insulin and some food with you to take after the examination. If you take long-acting insulin please do not stop taking it – speak to your diabetes team for advice.

Check your blood sugar regularly. If your blood sugar is below 4, have a sugary drink or some boiled sweets.

Consent – asking for your consent

We want to involve you in decisions about your care and treatment. If you decide to go ahead, you will be asked to sign a consent form. This states that you agree to have the treatment and you understand what it involves.

If you would like more information about our consent process, please speak to a member of staff caring for you.

Will I feel any pain?

This examination should not be painful. If you are concerned, please tell the radiologist or radiographer.

What happens after the barium follow-through?

Some people feel mildly uncomfortable and bloated after barium examinations. However, most people should have little, if any, effects. Once you are happy to leave, you are free to do so.

What do I need to do after I go home?

You should restart your usual diet. The barium contrast may cause some constipation. To prevent this, please drink plenty of fluids and eat plenty of fruit and vegetables (high in fibre). Some people find taking a mild laxative helps – these can be bought over the counter so please ask your local pharmacist for advice. The barium can often make your stools pale for a few days – this is normal.

What should I do if I have a problem after I go home?

If you feel unwell following the examination or have any concerns, please contact your GP or the X-ray Department.

Will I have a follow-up appointment?

The pictures taken during the examination are carefully studied by the radiologist, who will produce a detailed report. The results will be sent to the doctor who referred you for the test. They will discuss the results with you and any treatment you may need.

You should already have an appointment with the team who referred you. If not, please contact them to arrange one to discuss the results of this test.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about having a barium follow-through examination, please contact the **X-ray Department**, **t: 020 7188 5490** (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm).

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch.

t: 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111 **w:** 111.nhs.uk

NHS website

Online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing.

w: www.nhs.uk

Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, please get in touch.

t: 0800 731 0319 **e:** members@gstt.nhs.uk **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

Was this leaflet useful?

We want to make sure the information you receive is helpful to you. If you have any comments about this leaflet, we would be happy to hear from you, fill in our simple online form, **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets, or **e:** patientinformationteam@gstt.nhs.uk

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