

# Having a barium meal

**This leaflet aims to answer your questions about having a barium meal (bread meal and small bowel meal). It explains the benefits, risks and alternatives, as well as what you can 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 meal?

A barium meal is an examination of your oesophagus (food pipe), stomach and small bowel. These areas of the 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 that produces the images used to diagnose and treat illnesses).

The procedure uses fluoroscopic imaging, a type of x-ray, to view images in real time. This makes it possible to see the oesophagus, stomach and small bowel moving in your body. When they are coated with the barium contrast, the radiologist is able to check how they look and how well they are working.

## What happens during a barium meal?

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 of any medicines you are taking, severe allergies, recent illnesses or other medical conditions.

You will be given some fizzy granules, called carbex granules, to swallow with a small amount of lemon juice-like liquid – this creates gas and helps us see your stomach better. You will then be asked to drink a white liquid called barium contrast. The radiologist will then take a series of x-rays to see the contrast in your oesophagus, stomach and small bowel.

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.

The examination itself takes about 25 minutes, but please allow up to one hour for everything to be completed.

## Why should I have a barium meal?

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 making sure 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 oesophagus, 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 done 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. Please **do not eat or drink anything for six hours before your procedure.** 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 any medication prescribed by a doctor, 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 have 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.

**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 be painless. The fizzy granules can cause bloating and you may feel slight discomfort for a short time. If you are concerned, please tell the radiologist or radiographer.

## **What happens after the barium meal?**

Some people feel mildly uncomfortable and bloated after a barium examination. 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?**

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 meal, 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](http://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](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints)      **e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto: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](mailto: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](http://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](http://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](mailto:members@gstt.nhs.uk)      **w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership](http://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](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets), or **e:** [patientinformationteam@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:patientinformationteam@gstt.nhs.uk)

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