

Information for patients having a barium follow-through (small bowel meal)

About this leaflet

The leaflet tells you about having a barium follow-through. It explains what is involved and what the possible risks are. It is not meant to replace informed discussion between you and your doctor, but can act as a starting point for such discussions. If you have any questions about the procedure please ask the doctor who has referred you for the test or the department which is going to perform it.

Whether you are having a barium follow-through as a planned or as an emergency procedure, you should have sufficient explanation before the procedure begins.

The Radiology Department

The department may also be called the X-ray or imaging department. It is the facility in the hospital where radiological examinations of patients are carried out, using a range of equipment, such as a CT (computed tomography) scanner, an ultrasound machine and an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scanner.

Radiologists are doctors trained to interpret the images and carry out more complex examinations. They are supported by radiographers who are trained professionals and carry out X-rays and other imaging procedures.

What is a barium follow-through?

The study uses a barium solution to look at the small bowel, and is known as a barium follow-through (small bowel meal) examination. Sometimes the study may also look at the stomach.

Are there any risks?

All X-ray procedures involve exposure to radiation in varying amounts. Although we are exposed to small amounts of background radiation from the environment throughout our lives, large amounts of radiation, either in one go or cumulatively,

can add very slightly to the risk of developing cancer. The length and level of exposure to radiation from X-rays in medical procedures is strictly controlled and kept to the minimum possible.

In this procedure you will need to be exposed to radiation for several minutes. This means you will be subject to an amount of radiation comparable to that which we receive naturally from the environment over a period of 12 to 18 months.

There is also some slight risk if you are given an injection of Hyoscine Butylbromide (a muscle relaxant) to relax the stomach. The radiologist or radiographer will ask you if you have any history of heart disease or glaucoma before giving you this injection.

The risks from missing a serious disorder by *not* having this investigation are considerably greater.

Are you required to make any special preparations?

Yes, this is most important. You should receive an accompanying leaflet that contains specific instructions about what and when you may eat beforehand, and if you need to take any special medicine before coming to the hospital.

In general, your stomach and small intestine need to be empty for this examination to be successful. Therefore, you must not eat or drink anything for several hours beforehand. If you usually take medicines in the morning, do not take your morning dose(s), but bring your medicines to the department with you, and talk to the doctor there about it. If you fail to follow these instructions, you will not be able to have the examination and another appointment will have to be made, which will delay your diagnosis.

If you are diabetic

If you do take insulin or tablets, you need to make sure you have enough to eat on the day before your appointment to prevent low blood sugars and you should follow the advice given by the radiology department (usually in an accompanying leaflet).

If you are pregnant

This examination is not advisable for pregnant women, unless there are exceptional circumstances. Please advise the department in advance if you think you are, or might be, pregnant.

Can you bring a relative / friend?

Yes, but for reasons of safety, they may not be able to accompany you into the examination room, except in exceptional circumstances.

When you arrive

You should go to the reception desk in the department, after which you will be shown where to wait until collected by a radiographer or other member of staff.

You will be shown to a private cubicle where you can undress. Watches can generally still be worn during the examination, but necklaces will need to be removed. Ideally give your valuables, such as keys and credit cards, to a friend to look after or leave at home. Please tell the radiographer of any jewellery you cannot remove. It is generally better not to wear expensive jewellery when attending for your appointment.

You will be asked to put on the hospital gown and dressing gown provided. However, you may prefer to bring your own dressing gown or coat if you wish. You will be asked to place your clothes and personal items in a locker or a basket, which you will keep with you.

Who will you see?

You will usually be cared for by a small team including a radiologist, a radiographer and perhaps a nurse. Whoever is doing the examination will be watching a screen at the time and taking separate X-ray films.

A radiologist will subsequently examine the record of the images before writing a report on the findings.

Will it be uncomfortable?

You might feel a very slight discomfort when the radiologist presses on your stomach.

How long will it take?

With a “follow-through examination”, images need to be taken of the small bowel and you will have to wait 10–15 minutes before any X-rays are taken to allow the barium to pass through the small bowel. It is difficult to predict how long you will need to stay in the department – sometimes the examination is complete within an hour, usually longer – and can take up to several hours in some patients. You will therefore be required to stay in the department while X-rays are taken at regular intervals until the barium is seen to have gone through the entire small bowel. After this, you should be free to dress and leave the department.

Are there any after effects?

You may continue to feel slightly bloated for a short while until the barium works its way out. You will be able to eat and drink normally straight away and, for the first day or so, you should drink plenty of fluids to help the barium pass out of your system. Your stools will look white and remain discoloured for the next day or so. Some people may get slightly constipated and taking a mild laxative should help in this case. Barium stools are sometimes difficult to flush from the lavatory pan and may need repeat flushing.

If you had the stomach-relaxing injection, you must be certain that your eyesight has returned to normal before driving your car. Otherwise you should be able to return to your normal lifestyle and work straight away.

When will you get the results?

The scan will be examined after your visit and a written report on the findings sent to your referring doctor. This is normally available in 14 days.

Finally

Some of your questions should have been answered by this leaflet, but remember that this is only a starting point for discussion about your treatment with the doctors looking after you. Make sure you are satisfied that you have received enough information about the procedure.

Further information

For general information about radiology departments, visit The Royal College of Radiologists' website: www.goingfora.com

Local Information

X-ray appointments office – 01493 453659

Radiology nurses – 01493 452099



The hospital is able to arrange for an interpreter to assist you in communicating effectively with staff during your stay through INTRAN.

If you need an interpreter or a person to sign, please let us know.

**If you require a large print
version of this booklet,
please contact PALS on
01493 453240**

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