

Having a barium swallow (adult)

X-Ray Department
Tel: 01271 311869

Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please contact the PALS desk on 01271 314090 or at ndht.pals@nhs.net.

Why is a barium swallow test needed?

A barium swallow is an x-ray examination to assess the oesophagus (food pipe), stomach and other structures not usually seen on x-rays. Barium is a white liquid, which shows up on x-rays. As the barium is swallowed it coats the lining of the oesophagus and stomach making them visible on x-ray imaging. This allows for assessment of their anatomy and function during swallowing.

The test is commonly performed in people who have difficulty swallowing, a sensation of food being “stuck”, pain on swallowing, indigestion or for regurgitation of stomach contents, (reflux).

What does it involve?

When you arrive in the Radiology department, you will be asked to change into a hospital gown and then shown to a specialist x-ray room. Please feel free to ask any questions before we begin your examination.

You will be asked to stand next to the x-ray machine and you will then be asked to take mouthfuls of the liquid barium and to swallow it as the x-ray images are taken.

The radiographer will take a number of x-rays to watch the barium pass through your oesophagus and into your stomach.

You may be asked to stand in different positions so the oesophagus and stomach can be viewed from several angles.

What special preparations are needed?

You should not eat or drink for 4 hours before the test as it is important the oesophagus and stomach are empty prior to the test.

If you have diabetes, which requires treatment by tablet or injection, please phone the Diabetes Nurse on 01271 322726 between 9am and 5pm (Monday – Friday) for advice.

Any other medication may be taken with sips of water.

Individuals of childbearing capacity: Individuals of childbearing capacity are asked to contact the Radiology department if you suspect that you may be pregnant OR if the appointment is more than 10 days after the start of your past period. This test uses radiation and there is a risk to the unborn baby if we were to do the x-rays when you are pregnant. When you arrive for your test, you will be asked when your last period started. If it is more than 10 days earlier, your appointment will be postponed.

Any allergies

You should inform us in advance if you have any known allergies, particularly to **barium** or **iodine**.

How long will it take?

The test takes 10-20 minutes.

Are there any side/after effects or risks?

After the test, some of the barium will be retained in your bowel. Therefore, this may cause your motions to be discoloured or pale as the barium passes through for the next 2-3 days. Barium can cause constipation. To avoid this, drink plenty of fluids and eat normally after the test.

Barium is not absorbed by the body as it only coats the walls of the oesophagus, stomach and bowel, any allergic reactions are extremely rare.

The test involves the use of x-rays for which strict guidelines are in place regarding their use in diagnosing medical conditions. Barium swallow tests can only be performed at the request of a doctor and we will keep the radiation dose as low as we possibly can. Your doctor believes it is advisable that you should have this examination and do bear in mind there are greater risks from missing a serious disorder by not having your test.

If you are worried about constipation after the test, please contact your GP.

Possible complications

Barium can occasionally go down the wrong way. Normally this does not cause any problems. However, occasionally treatment with physiotherapy and possibly antibiotics is needed. You are watched carefully during the test to avoid this happening.

If you are prone to choking on your food, please tell the doctor about it when you come for your test.

Further information

If you have any further questions or concerns about your barium swallow, please phone the X-Ray Department on **01271 311869**.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

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