

Barium test

This fact sheet tells you what a barium test is, and what is involved. Please read this sheet before you have your barium test. If you have any questions, ask your doctor.

What is a barium test?

A barium test is a medical imaging procedure. It is used to take images of your digestive tract (gut) to look for problems such as narrow areas, ulcers or damage.

This test uses a white powder (barium) mixed in a liquid. This mixture can be swallowed (barium meal test) or inserted into your digestive tract through your rectum using a small tube (barium enema).

The imaging staff will then use a moving-image X-ray (fluoroscopy) to take pictures of your digestive tract.

You may also be given a medicine to relax your muscles.

For some people, barium may not be suitable, so an iodine-based liquid called Gastrografin might be used.

What is involved?

You will be given full instructions on how to prepare for your barium test.

Before you have the test, you should tell your doctor and the imaging staff whether you have any allergies, are pregnant or think you might be pregnant, or have glaucoma or diabetes.

If you are having the barium or Gastrografin meal test, you will need to fast beforehand. Also, if you are having the test to look at your large bowel, you may need to take a special preparation to completely clean out your bowel.

What happens after the test?

A radiologist (a specialist doctor) will assess the images of your digestive tract and then send the results to your referring doctor.

This test might cause constipation. But when you do go to the toilet, you may find you pass the white barium mixture. If you had the Gastrografin instead of barium, it might increase the number of times you need to go to the toilet.

Are there any risks?

Barium tests are usually safe, but sometimes problems can happen, such as barium leaking into your abdomen.

If you took a medicine to relax your muscles, you might get side effects from this medicine such as blurred vision.

During a barium test you will be exposed to a small amount of radiation. The benefits of detecting a problem are generally much more important than any potential risk from receiving such a small dose of radiation.

For more information

InsideRadiology by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Radiologists: www.insideradiology.com.au

RadiologyInfo by the American College of Radiology and Radiological Society of North America: www.radiologyinfo.org

Better Health Channel by the Victorian Government: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

The Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency: www.arpansa.gov.au

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