



# Barium swallow / meal / follow through

## Information for patients from the Radiology Department

You have been referred for a **barium swallow / meal / follow through**. This leaflet explains:

- what a barium swallow / meal / follow through is
- what happens during the procedure, and
- what the possible risks are.

If you have any questions after reading this leaflet, please discuss them with your GP, specialist, or radiographer.

### What is a barium swallow / meal / follow through?

The stomach and other parts of the gut do not show up well on ordinary x-rays. To see them more clearly we coat them with barium (a heavy white fluid). Occasionally the stomach is filled with air as well.

### Why do I need a barium swallow / meal / follow through?

You may have one or more of the following symptoms and your doctor has decided to investigate the cause.

- Difficulty swallowing
- Pain
- Unexplained weight loss.

Barium examinations are one of the easiest ways of looking at the upper part of the digestive tract.

### Who has requested this procedure?

After speaking with you, your doctors feel that this procedure may help with your diagnosis.

### Who will be doing the barium swallow / meal / follow through?

A radiologist or specialist radiographer will carry out your examination. Either a radiographer, assistant / student radiographer, or nurse will assist them. The radiographer / radiologist will review the images and send a report to your referring doctor.

### Where will the procedure take place?

The procedure will take place in a 'screening room' within the X-ray Department.

**Due to the nature of this examination, unaccompanied children cannot be in the department while you are having this procedure. Children / friends / family are not allowed into the examination room with you.**

### How do I prepare for a barium swallow / meal / follow through?

For your examination to be successful, your stomach and small intestine need to be empty. Do not eat or drink for several hours before your examination (usually from 10pm the night before). Full instructions will be included with your appointment letter.

If you are diabetic and have concerns about fasting, please contact your GP or diabetic nurse.

### What happens during a barium swallow / meal / follow through?

- The radiologist or specialist radiographer will introduce themselves and explain the procedure.
- You will be positioned in front of the screening machine, standing on a small step. The step is attached to the couch in its upright position.
- You will be given a cup of barium to drink, whilst x-ray images are taken so we can see your oesophagus.
- If images of your stomach are needed, you may be given a small injection into a vein in your arm to relax your bowel.
- You may be given some granules and lemon juice to drink. These fill your stomach with gas to allow the radiologist or specialist radiographer to get better images.
- If we need images of your small bowel, we will ask you to wait in the waiting room while we take images at intervals.

### Is the procedure uncomfortable?

If you have an injection, you will feel some minor discomfort. You might feel slight discomfort from your stomach being full of air.

### How long will it take?

It should take about 10 to 20 minutes to image your oesophagus or stomach. We recommend that you allow at least 1 hour for the examination.

If we need images of your small bowel, you could be in the department for 2 or 3 hours.

### Are there any risks or complications?

- All x-ray procedures involve exposure to radiation in varying amounts. The duration and level of x-rays are kept to a minimum, but you need to be exposed to x-rays for 2 to 3 minutes. This is the same as what we receive naturally from the environment over 12 to 18 months.
- There is also a small risk from the injection. **Please tell the radiographer if you have heart disease, glaucoma, or myasthenia gravis.**

Despite these risks, your doctor has decided that you should have this examination. The risks from missing a serious disorder by not having the examination, are considered to be much greater.

### For patients of childbearing age

If there is any possibility you are pregnant, please contact the department for advice.

### What if I have any further questions?

If you have any queries or concerns about this test, please ask your doctor. Or you can contact Radiology and speak to a barium radiographer or radiology nurse.

- **Radiology Department**  
Telephone: 01233 616033

### References

This leaflet is produced with grateful acknowledgment to the Patient's Liaison Group of the Royal College of Radiologists and East Kent Radiology Staff.

**This leaflet has been produced with and for patients.**

**Please let us know:**

- If you have any accessibility needs; this includes needing a hearing loop or wanting someone to come with you to your appointment.
- If you need an interpreter.
- If you need this information in another format (such as Braille, audio, large print or Easy Read).

**You can let us know this by:**

- Visiting the Trust web site (<https://www.ekhuft.nhs.uk/ais>).
- Calling the number at the top of your appointment letter.
- Adding this information to the Patient Portal (<https://pp.ekhuft.nhs.uk/login>).
- Telling a member of staff at your next appointment.

**Any complaints, comments, concerns or compliments**, please speak to a member of your healthcare team. Or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service on 01227 783145 or email ([ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net)).

**Patients should not bring large sums of money or valuables into hospital.** Please note that East Kent Hospitals accepts no responsibility for the loss or damage to personal property, unless the property has been handed into Trust staff for safe-keeping.

**Further patient information leaflets** are available via the East Kent Hospitals' web site (<https://www.ekhuft.nhs.uk/patient-information>).

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