



Oxford University Hospitals  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Paediatric barium swallow/meal

**Information for parents and carers**



**Your doctor has referred your child for a barium swallow/meal to look at their food pipe and stomach.**

We have written this information leaflet to help you and your child to understand this test. We hope it answers some of the questions you both may have and helps you and your child to feel more prepared and relaxed.

## **What is a barium swallow/meal?**

A barium swallow /meal uses a special liquid to allow the doctor (radiologist) to see your child's food pipe (oesophagus), as well as the stomach and first part of the small intestine. This liquid shows up black on images which allows the radiologist to see your child's anatomy. The radiologist is also helped by the radiographer who helps take the X-rays.

## **What does the test involve?**

Your child will be asked to drink a special drink called barium. This is a white liquid with a chalky texture. It is not radioactive but shows up well on X-ray images.

We mix the liquid with milkshake powder (e.g. Nesquik) which comes in chocolate, strawberry or banana. Your child can choose which flavour they want.

Your child will need to drink the barium lying flat on the X-ray bed with the X-ray camera over their tummy (about 75cm away). They may need to change position e.g. lie on their side or roll over to help the liquid move around the digestive system, so we may ask you to stay next to your child in the room. If your child can, they will be asked to drink through a straw so they can stay lying down. If they are not able to, they can drink from a bottle or beaker, or syringe if they are fed using a nasogastric (NG) tube.

You and your child will be able to see the pictures of the barium moving through their body on the TV screen.

## **How long does this test last?**

The time the test takes to complete varies from child to child, but should take no longer than 20-30 minutes.

Normally we ask for one parent/carer to stay next to your child during the test to offer support and reassurance, and to make sure they are safe whilst moving around during the X-ray. You will be asked to wear a protective lead apron, which is quite heavy. This helps to protect your body from the X-rays during the test.

We cannot allow you to stay close to your child if there is any chance that you may be pregnant, as the radiation from the X-rays can be harmful to an unborn baby. You will be able to remain in the room but would need to stand behind the lead screen if there is a chance that you may be pregnant.

If you think you may be pregnant, you may want to bring someone to stay next to your child whilst the test is being carried out.

We cannot allow children under 16 to come into the X-ray room as they may also be affected by the X-rays. If you have younger children with you, please bring someone else to care for them in the waiting room while we are carrying out the test.

## **Are there any risks?**

Everyone is exposed to ionising radiation all the time (for example, from gamma rays from space, air travel, natural radiation from the ground). This test will give your child a small extra dose of ionising radiation in the form of X-rays. Your doctors have taken this into account when asking your child to have this test and believe that, despite this small additional exposure to radiation, it is still in their best interest for them to have the test. We can adjust the levels of radiation used for the X-rays so that we only use the lowest dose we need to get the required images.

If your child is aged 12 or over, you will be asked to complete a form to establish their gender at birth. If your child was born female, you will be asked to record the date of her last period. As the test uses radiation, we have to ensure that there is no chance of pregnancy before we start the examination.

The form must be completed by female patients even if they have not yet started their periods, as we still legally have to confirm that she could not be pregnant.

## **What do I need to bring with me?**

### **Please bring:**

- comforters or special toys which are familiar to your child
- activities to entertain your child whilst waiting
- feeding bottle and teat or a familiar beaker for younger children
- drink and something to eat for your child after the test is finished

Your child may wear their own clothes, as long as there is nothing on them that will show up on the pictures. This includes no metal, zips or glittery sequins or jewellery. For older children a gown can be provided if clothing has picture transfers or embroidery on.

## **Is there anything I should do to prepare my child?**

Please make sure you follow the instructions in your child's appointment letter, including when to stop eating and drinking before the test.

It is important that you talk with your child about their visit to hospital and the test at a level you think they will understand. Involve them in preparing to come for the test. Books and stories might help with this. If they are well prepared and know what to expect, they will be happier to go along with what we will ask them to do during the test. It may also help them to cope better afterwards and to not be upset by the experience.

## **Is there anything I need to do after the test?**

Once the test is complete your child can go back to their usual eating and drinking patterns. The barium will make your child's poo (faeces) pale in colour for 24 – 48 hours after the test. This is normal because of the colour of the barium drink. Sometimes barium can cause constipation, so it is a good idea for your child to drink plenty of fluid to help flush it through their digestive system.

## **When and how will we know the result of the examination?**

The radiologist who carries out the test will be able to talk to you about what they have initially seen on the X-ray images at the end of the examination.

A formal report will be sent within the next few days to the person who referred your child for the test.

The results will be discussed at your child's next outpatient appointment. If they do not have one booked or you do not hear anything within three weeks, please telephone your referring doctor for advice.

### **Please note:**

**If your child has any special needs or requirements, or you would like more information about the test, please telephone the Radiology Department on the number given in your appointment letter.**

## **How to contact us**

### **For appointment queries:**

Tel: **01865 228 944**

(8.30am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday)

### **For pre-test queries:**

Children's Radiology Reception

Tel: **01865 231 950**

(8.30am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday)

Children's Radiology Radiographers

Tel: **01865 231 952**

(8.30am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday)

## Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust  
[www.ouh.nhs.uk/information](http://www.ouh.nhs.uk/information)



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