Barium Swallow

A barium swallow is an x-ray examination. It evaluates only the area at the back of the throat (*pharynx*) and the "food pipe" that leads to the stomach (*esophagus*). For this study, the patient swallows a white chalky liquid called "barium". Barium blocks standard x-ray beams, It looks much different on x-ray film when compared to nearby organs. Because of the way barium works, it is often called a "contrast material". It is an easy, fast, and safe method for getting x-ray pictures that can identify possible problems.

A barium swallow helps in the evaluation of some digestive functions and to detect:

- Ulcers.
- Tumors.
- Inflammation of the esophagus.
- Hiatal hernias (the upper portion of the stomach protrudes into the chest cavity through an opening of the diaphragm).
- Scarring.
- Blockages.
- Problems with muscular wall of the pharynx and esophagus.

The procedure is also used to help diagnose symptoms such as:

- Difficulty swallowing.
- Chest and abdominal pain.
- Reflux (a backward flow of partially digested food and digestive juices).
- Unexplained vomiting.
- Severe indigestion.

BEFORE THE PROCEDURE

To ensure the best possible image quality, your stomach should be empty of food. You will likely be asked not to eat or drink anything and to refrain from chewing gum and smoking after midnight on the day of the examination. Your caregiver will provide specific instructions about taking or not taking regular prescription medications on the day of test.

You may be asked to remove some or all of your clothes and to wear a gown during the exam. You may also be asked to remove jewelry, eye glasses and any metal objects or clothing that might interfere with the x-ray images.

LET YOUR CAREGIVER KNOW ABOUT:

- Allergies, especially to **contrast materials.**
- Medications taken including herbs, eye drops, over the counter medications, and creams.
- Use of steroids (by mouth or creams).
- Possible pregnancy, if applicable.
- History of blood clots (thrombophlebitis).
- History of bleeding or blood problems.
- Previous surgery.
- Other health problems.

THE PROCEDURE

The patient drinks the liquid barium, which looks like a light-colored milkshake. The radiologist is watching the barium pass through the digestive tract on a *fluoroscope*. This is a device that projects x-ray images in a movie-like sequence onto a monitor. The exam table will be positioned at different angles and the abdomen may be compressed to help spread the barium. Once the esophagus is coated with the barium, still x-ray pictures are taken and stored for further review. It is important to hold still while the x-ray picture is taken. That will reduce the chances of a blurred image.

RISKS & COMPLICATIONS OF THE PROCEDURE

- There is RARE chance of cancer from radiation exposure. However, the benefit of an accurate diagnosis far outweighs the risk.
- Some patients may be allergic to the flavoring added to some brands of barium. If you have experienced allergic reactions after eating chocolate, certain berries or citrus fruit, be sure to tell your caregiver or the technologist before the procedure.
- There is a RARE chance that some barium could be retained leading to a blockage of the digestive system. Patients who have an obstruction in the gastrointestinal tract should not undergo this exam.
- Women should always inform their physician or x-ray technologist if there is any possibility that they are pregnant.

AFTER THE PROCEDURE

The barium may color your stools gray or white for 48 to 72 hours after the procedure. Sometimes the barium can cause temporary constipation. This condition is usually treated by an over-the-counter stool softener or laxative. Drinking larger than normal amounts of fluids following the test can also help.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

After the examination, you can resume a regular diet and take orally administered medications unless told otherwise by your doctor.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- If you are unable to have a bowel movement.
- If your bowel habits undergo any significant changes following the exam, you should contact your physician.
- You experience worsening problems with swallowing, food “getting stuck”, nausea, or pain.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop worsening abdominal pain.
- You develop vomiting.
- You develop any chest pain, lightheadedness, unusual sweating.
- You develop weakness, or you faint.

Document Released: 04/30/2008 Document Re-Released: 09/26/2009
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.