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ص.ب: ٤٨٥٧٧، دبي، ا.ع.م.

هاتف: ٢٦٧ ٨٨٦٦ - فاكس: ٢٦٧ ٨٨٥٥ - ا.ع.م.

ص.ب: ٤٥٧، الشارقة، ا.ع.م.

هاتف: ٥٦٥ ٨٨٦٦ - فاكس: ٥٦٥ ٦٦٩٩ - ا.ع.م.

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Information – Barium Meal



The leaflet tells you about having a barium meal. It explains what is involved and what the possible risks are. It is not meant to replace informed discussion between you and your doctor, but can act as a starting point for such discussions. If you have any questions about the procedure please ask the doctor who has referred you for the test or the department which is going to perform it.

What is a barium meal?

The stomach, like other parts of the gut, does not show up well on ordinary X-rays; for example, to allow a radiologist to diagnose small ulcers. However, if the lining of the stomach is coated with barium, a white liquid which shows up on X-rays, and if the stomach is also distended by extra gas, which shows up black, then much greater detail is obtained. This is called a barium meal. In addition, the radiologist may examine your gullet (oesophagus) at the same time.

Are there any risks?

All X-ray procedures involve exposure to radiation in varying amounts. Although we are exposed to small amounts of background radiation from the environment throughout our lives, large amounts of radiation, either in one go or cumulatively, can add very slightly to the risk of developing cancer. The length and level of exposure to radiation from X-rays in medical procedures is strictly controlled and kept to the minimum possible.

In this procedure you will need to be exposed to radiation for several minutes. This means you will be subject to an amount of radiation comparable to that which we receive naturally from the environment over a period of 12 to 18 months.

However, as one in three of us will develop a cancer at some stage during our lives, the added risk is very small. Also, the risks from missing a serious disorder by *not* having this investigation are considerably greater.

Are you required to make any special preparations?

Yes, this is most important. In general, your stomach and small intestine need to be empty for this examination to be successful. Therefore, you must not eat or drink anything for several hours beforehand. If you usually take medicines in the morning, do not take your morning dose(s), but bring your medicines to the department with you, and talk to the doctor there about it. If you fail to follow these instructions, you will not be able to have the examination and another appointment will have to be made, which will delay the diagnosis.

If you are pregnant

This examination is not advisable for pregnant women, unless there are exceptional circumstances. Please advise the department in advance if you think you are, or might be, pregnant.

Can you bring a relative/friend?

Yes, but for reasons of safety, they may not be able to accompany you into the examination room, except in very special circumstances.

When you arrive

You should go to the reception desk in the department, after which you will be shown where to wait until collected by a radiographer or other member of staff.

You will be shown to a private cubicle where you can undress. Watches can generally still be worn during the examination, but necklaces will need to be removed. Ideally give your valuables, such as keys and credit cards, to a friend to look after or leave at home.

You will be asked to put on the hospital gown and dressing gown provided. However, you may prefer to bring your own dressing gown or coat if you wish. You will be asked to place your clothes and personal items in a locker or a basket, which you will keep with you.

Who will you see?

You will usually be cared for by a small team including a radiologist, a radiographer and perhaps a nurse. Whoever is doing the examination will be watching a screen at the time and taking separate X-ray films. A radiologist will subsequently examine the record of the images before writing a report on the findings.

What happens during the investigation?

You will be taken into the X-ray room and asked to take off the dressing gown but keep on the hospital gown. You will be asked to drink from a cup/beaker containing the barium – a sticky white liquid which is mildly fruit flavoured, one or two mouthfuls at a time. This coats the lining of the gullet and stomach, so that they show up on the monitor and on the X-ray films.

The radiologist watches on the screen and also takes pictures. Once the gullet has been studied, the machine will slowly tilt, so that you are lying horizontally, and more pictures are taken of the stomach. You will be asked to move into different positions and to hold your breath while the pictures are taken. You may also be asked to swallow lying down.

How long will it take?

This whole process should take about 10–15 minutes. Afterwards you will put on your dressing gown again and sit in the waiting area until the radiologist is satisfied that none of them have to be taken again (usually a 10–15 minute wait). After this, you should be free to dress and leave the department.

Are there any after-effects?

You will be able to eat and drink normally straight away and, for the first day or so, you should drink plenty of fluids to help the barium pass out of your system. Your stools will look white and remain discoloured for the next day or so. Some people may get slightly constipated and taking a mild laxative should help in this case.

When will you get the results?

The scan will be examined after your visit and a written report on the findings sent to your referring doctor which is normally available in 2 days.

Finally

Some of your questions should have been answered by this leaflet, but remember that this is only a starting point for discussion about your treatment with the doctors looking after you. Make sure you are satisfied that you have received enough information about the procedure.