

Barium swallow

What is a barium swallow?

A **barium swallow** is a diagnostic test used to examine your oesophagus (food pipe), stomach, and the upper part of your small intestine. It involves drinking a liquid called **barium sulfate**, which coats the lining of your digestive tract and makes it visible on X-rays. This allows your doctor to identify abnormalities such as blockages, inflammation, or structural problems that may not be detected with standard X-rays. At Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic, we use barium swallow tests to diagnose a variety of conditions and help guide effective treatment.

Why might you need a barium swallow?

Your doctor may recommend a barium swallow if you are experiencing symptoms that could indicate a problem with your upper digestive system. These symptoms might include:

- Difficulty swallowing (dysphagia)
- Persistent heartburn or acid reflux
- Regurgitation of food or liquids
- Unexplained chest pain or discomfort
- Feeling like food is stuck in your throat or chest
- Chronic cough or hoarseness
- Frequent nausea or vomiting

A barium swallow can help diagnose conditions such as:

- **Hiatus hernia** where part of the stomach pushes into the chest
- **Oesophageal strictures** narrowing of the oesophagus
- **Gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD)** persistent acid reflux
- **Oesophageal cancer** or other abnormalities in the oesophagus
- **Ulcers** or inflammation in the stomach or upper small intestine

How do you prepare for a barium swallow?

To ensure accurate results, you'll need to prepare for your barium swallow test:

- Do not eat or drink for 6-8 hours before the procedure to keep your stomach and oesophagus empty
- Inform your doctor if you're pregnant, have allergies, or are taking any medications
- Wear loose-fitting, comfortable clothing and avoid wearing jewellery to your appointment

Your consultant will provide specific instructions tailored to your needs.

What happens during a barium swallow?

The procedure is simple and typically takes about 15-30 minutes. Here's what to expect:

- You will be asked to drink a chalky, flavoured liquid containing barium. This coats the lining of your digestive tract, making it easier to see on X-rays
- You will stand or lie in different positions while a series of X-ray images are taken to capture detailed views of your oesophagus, stomach, and small intestine
- You may be asked to hold your breath briefly during the X-rays to ensure clear images

The test is painless, but some people find the barium drink slightly unpleasant. You can go home shortly after the procedure.

Are there any risks or side effects?

A barium swallow is a safe procedure for most people, but there are a few mild side effects to be aware of:

- Temporary constipation, as barium can slow down your bowel movements
- White or light-coloured stools for a day or two, as your body eliminates the barium
- A feeling of bloating or fullness

To minimise these effects, drink plenty of fluids after the test to help flush the barium out of your system. Rarely, there may be a risk of aspiration (inhaling the barium into the lungs) or an allergic reaction, but these complications are extremely uncommon.

What happens after the test?

Your doctor will review the X-ray images and discuss the findings with you. If abnormalities are detected, further tests or treatments may be recommended, such as an upper GI endoscopy or biopsy to confirm the diagnosis. Your consultant will work closely with you to create a personalised treatment plan.

Why choose Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic?

At Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic, we specialise in diagnosing and managing digestive health conditions using advanced diagnostic tools like barium swallow tests. Our experienced team provides a patient-centred approach, ensuring you feel supported throughout your diagnostic journey. With state-of-the-art facilities, we



deliver accurate results and tailored treatment plans to help you achieve the best possible outcomes.

Contact us

If you're experiencing difficulty swallowing, persistent heartburn, or other digestive symptoms, contact Birmingham Endoscopy Clinic today to book a consultation. Early diagnosis and treatment can make all the difference in improving your health and quality of life.