

Contrast enema

A member of your multidisciplinary team (MDT) has recommended that you have a contrast enema study which is an examination that assesses your large bowel. This information sheet explains what to expect when you come into the hospital, what the procedure involves, the possible risks and aftercare advice.

What is a contrast enema?

A contrast enema is a fluoroscopy procedure (an examination performed under x-ray guidance) to assess the large bowel. The gut does not show up very well on ordinary x-rays, however, if coated with a contrast liquid (which shows up white on x-rays) and if also distended by extra gas (which shows up black on x-rays) then much greater detail is seen.

How long will it take?

The procedure will take approximately 30 minutes, but in some cases it may take longer.

What preparation do I need?

You may be asked to take a mild laxative to help clear your bowel. If this required, we will inform you. Make sure you do not have anything to eat or drink **six hours** prior to your examination.

If you are **diabetic** and take insulin or tablets, make sure you bring food to eat after your appointment to prevent low blood sugars.

If you have any allergies, you must tell your doctors. If you have previously reacted to intravenous contrast medium (the dye used for kidney x-ray and CT scans) also let your doctors know.

Patients should inform the x-ray staff if they are or might be pregnant before the day of the procedure.

When you arrive

Please report to the reception desk in the x-ray department with your appointment letter. The reception staff will show you where to wait until a radiographer or other member of staff comes to collect you.

Upon collection, we will escort you to an x-ray room and ask you to change into a hospital gown and to remove any metal objects from the area that is to be examined (jewellery, zips, metallic fastenings and so on). You will be cared for by a small team including a radiologist and a radiographer.



What does the examination involve?

We will ask you to lie on an x-ray table on your side to begin with and a small tube will be inserted into your back passage. Contrast liquid is then passed through the tube into your colon. You will either be given a barium contrast which is a thick white liquid or a water-soluble contrast which is a colourless liquid. The radiologist will decide which contrast will be used depending on your symptoms.

The aim of the procedure is to get the contrast liquid to coat the entire large bowel. To help with this, the radiologist may:

- Ask you to move into different positions such as on to your back, sides and front
- Give you a muscle relaxant that reduces the natural movement of your bowel for the short duration of the procedure
- Inflate the bowel with air through the tube. This may feel slightly uncomfortable and similar to 'trapped wind', however it is important that you hold the gas in.

When the contrast has spread throughout the colon, several x-ray images are taken with you in different positions to capture all parts of the colon. The tube is then removed. and we will show you to the nearest toilet for your comfort.

After the examination

At the end of the examination when the tube is removed, you may want to visit the toilet to expel some air, although the gas will be expelled from your bowel naturally over the course of the next few hours. The gas may cause some bloating and discomfort, but this should pass as it is released. We will check that you are comfortable before you leave. You can return to the ward or go home after the procedure, when you feel a bit more comfortable. You can eat and drink as normal.

Where barium contrast is used, your stools will become white and remain discoloured for a few days. The barium may make you constipated, so to help prevent constipation:

- Have lots to drink to flush the barium out of your gut
- Eat plenty of fruit.

When will I get the results?

The images will be examined by the radiologist and a written report on the findings will be sent to your referring doctor within seven days of your examination. The radiologist will examine the images and send a written report on the findings to your referring doctor within seven days of your examination. Your referring doctor will contact you to discuss the results.

Are there any risks or side effects?

We will expose you to ionising radiation when we carry out this examination. We are all exposed to ionising radiation from naturally occurring sources such as cosmic rays, certain types of soil and rocks and even food we eat. Ionising radiation can cause cell damage that in turn, after many years, may turn cancerous. The radiation associated with your exam will therefore carry a small risk which is less than 0.1%. This risk will be far outweighed by the benefits of having this exposure. We will also tailor the amount of radiation we use to you.



In rare circumstances, perforation of the colon (making a small hole in the wall of the colon) may occur. This is a small risk if you have an inflamed colon (in which case a water-soluble contrast would be used instead).

If you have an injection to relax the muscles in your colon, it may cause some blurring of your vision for an hour or so. If this happens, you will be advised not to drive until this passes. The barium does not get absorbed into the body, so it is rare for barium to cause any other complications or side effects.

Usually there are no prolonged or late side effects from the procedure.

If you feel unwell after your procedure when you get home, you can either contact your GP or your local Accident and Emergency department.

Can I bring a relative or friend?

Yes, but for safety reasons they will not be able to accompany you into the x-ray room except in very special circumstances.

Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns about your procedure, or you are unable to attend this appointment, please call the Radiology Department (Monday to Friday, 9am – 5pm).

Chelsea: 020 7808 2571

Sutton: 020 8661 3736

Alternatively, please call:

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899

(available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

