

Contrast follow-through

A member of your multidisciplinary team (MDT) has recommended that you have a contrast follow-through which is an examination that assesses your stomach and small 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 follow-through?

A contrast follow-through is a fluoroscopy procedure (an examination performed under x-ray guidance) to examine the stomach and small bowel. The stomach, like other parts of the gut, does not show up well on ordinary x-rays. However, if coated with a contrast liquid (which shows up white on x-rays) then much greater detail of the stomach and duodenum is seen.

There are a number of reasons why your doctor may have requested that you to have this examination, including:

- Unexplained abdominal pain
- Small bowel obstruction
- Suspected bowel fistula
- Blood in the stool
- Follow up post-surgical procedure
- Cancer of the small bowel.

How long will it take?

The total time necessary for the test depends on the time it takes for the contrast to reach the large bowel and may vary between two to three hours.

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 this examination involve?

You will either be given a barium contrast which is a thick white liquid or a water-soluble contrast which is a colourless fruit-flavoured liquid. The radiologist will decide which contrast will be used depending on your symptoms.

The examination will begin with you standing on a small step attached to the x-ray table in its upright position, in front of an x-ray camera. You will be given the contrast to drink with a few mouthfuls at a time and x-rays will be taken and recorded while you swallow.

Once the gullet has been studied, we will position you to lie on the x-ray table and take more images of the stomach. We may ask you to move into different positions and to hold your breath while the images are taken.

A series of images will be taken at different time intervals to visualise the pathway of the contrast in the small bowel. As an outpatient, you will need to stay within the department for the entire period. As an inpatient, you may go back to the ward during these intervals.

What preparation do I need?

In general, your stomach and small intestines need to be empty for this examination to be successful so you must **not** eat anything for **four hours** beforehand.

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.

After the examination

The procedure is painless and you can return to the ward or go home immediately after the appointment as there are no side effects. You can eat and drink as normal.

Where barium contrast is used, your stools will become white and will 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 radiologist will examine the images and send a 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?

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.

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)

