

Before or during the procedure you will probably be given an injection to relax the muscles of the bowel wall, and make the examination easier. This injection may cause some blurring of the vision, and you are advised not to drive for an hour or so afterwards. Once the examination is complete, the tube will be removed, and you will be able to go to the toilet.

Will it be uncomfortable?

During the examination you might feel the slight discomfort associated with a full bowel.

How long will it take?

The whole process of taking the images will take about 20 minutes. Unless you are delayed by having to wait, such as for an emergency patient, your total time in the department should be about 1 hour.

Are there any side effects?

You will want to visit the toilet immediately after the examination, and it is advisable to remain within reach of a toilet for the next few hours. Your stools will appear white and may remain discoloured for the next few days.

If you have had an injection to relax the muscles of the bowel, then you should wait for up to an hour before driving home,

or, have a friend drive you. Some people are happy to go on to work afterwards, but most prefer to have several hours at home, recovering before resuming normal activities.

Can I eat and drink afterwards?

Yes, do so normally, especially drinking plenty of fluids for at least three days to prevent becoming constipated.

When will I get the results?

After the procedure, the images will be examined by the radiologist, who will then write a report on the findings. This may take some time to reach your referring doctor, but this is normally within 14 days.

If you have a query?

If you have a query about having the barium enema, please ring the Imaging /Radiology Department on the number shown on your appointment letter, between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday.

Adults having a barium enema

What is a Barium Enema?

A barium enema is a special x-ray study of the large bowel (colon and rectum). Barium is used as a contrast medium to coat the bowel and shows up white on x-rays. During the examination, air can be put into the bowel to distend it (make it swell), and this combined process is sufficient to diagnose minor degrees of inflammation or small tumours and tiny polyps. Both the barium and the air need to be passed into the bowel through a small, soft tube, which is inserted into the rectum via the back passage.

Are there any risks?

An x-ray examination of the large bowel does carry certain risks. The duration and level of x-rays are kept to a minimum, but you do need to be exposed to x-rays for a total of two or three minutes. This means you are subjected to a quantity of radiation equivalent to the amount we all receive naturally from the atmosphere over a period of about three years.

You will usually be given an injection into a vein of a substance which relaxes the bowel and reduces any spasm of the bowel. This makes the examination more comfortable and has very little risk.

Despite these risks, the risk of missing a serious disorder by not having the examination is greater.

Am I required to make any special preparations?

Yes, this is important. It is essential that your bowel should be empty, and an accompanying appointment letter will explain what you should eat and how you need to take the special laxative provided. This laxative is vigorous and to avoid inconvenience it is best to stay at home on the day before the examination.

Can I bring a relative/friend?

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

When I arrive

If you are diabetic, or a female patient who may be pregnant, please inform the radiographer prior to the examination.

You will be shown to a cubicle where you should undress, and remove jewellery, watches or any metallic objects etc.

You will be asked to put on a surgical gown, if you wish you can bring your own dressing gown to wear over the gown.

You will be provided with a basket for your personal items which you keep with you at all times.

Who will I see?

You will be cared for by a small team including a radiographer and possibly also a radiologist. Whoever is doing the examination will be watching a television screen at all times, and taking separate x-rays. After the examination the radiologist will review the x-ray images and issue a written report.

What happens during the barium enema investigation?

You will be taken into the special x-ray room and asked take off your dressing gown, but you will still wear the surgical gown. You will be asked to lie down on the x-ray table, on your left side at first. A soft plastic tube will be inserted into your rectum via your back passage, and the barium liquid will be passed into your bowel. The radiologist or radiographer watches this on a television screen and asks you to move into different positions, both to help the barium flow round the bowel and to see each bowel loop separate from other over-lapping loops. Once sufficient barium is in the bowel, a quantity of air is also introduced through the same tube, and this both distends the bowel, and makes the detail more clear. At this point, several x-rays will be taken with you in different positions, some probably with you standing up, and some with you lying on your side.