Small Bowel Follow Through Exam

How to prepare and what to expect

This handout explains an X-ray exam of the large and small intestines, called small bowel follow through. It includes how the exam is done, how to prepare, what to expect, and how to get your results.

What is a small bowel follow through exam?

A small bowel follow through is an X-ray exam of the small intestine and the colon (large intestine). Most patients have this exam because their healthcare provider (referring doctor) requested it.

How does the exam work?

To help details of your intestines show clearly on the X-rays, you will swallow a liquid contrast (X-ray dye) called barium. The barium coats the inside of your intestines and appears bright white on the X-ray images.

How do I prepare?

- Your provider will give you detailed instructions on how to prepare.
- Tell your provider about:
  - Any recent illnesses or other health problems
  - Any allergies you have to medicines, especially if you have ever had an allergic reaction to contrast
- Women: Tell your provider if there is any chance you are pregnant.

The Night Before

- Eat your evening meal as usual.
- After midnight:
  - Do not eat or drink anything, including antacids. The X-ray images can be affected if your stomach is not empty.
The Morning of Your Exam

- Do not eat or drink anything, including antacids.
- Do not chew gum or smoke.
- It is OK to take your prescribed medicines with small sips of water.

What can I expect?

- This exam is usually scheduled in the morning to reduce the length of time you have to go without eating.
- You will be asked to put on a hospital gown.
- You will need to remove jewelry, glasses, and any metal objects that could affect the X-ray images.
- The exam can take from 1 to 5 hours, depending on how quickly the barium moves through your body.

How is the exam done?

- A radiology technologist will help you get into position on an exam table.
- The technologist will take an X-ray. This is done to get a “baseline” image of your intestines before you drink the barium.
- You will then drink 2 bottles of liquid barium, which is like a thin milkshake.
- After you have swallowed all the barium, another X-ray will be taken. A special X-ray machine called a fluoroscope may be used. A fluoroscope can take real-time moving images of the barium moving through your intestines.

What will I feel during the exam?

- The liquid barium has a chalky taste. It may be have a strawberry, cherry, or vanilla flavor. After you drink the 2 bottles of barium, you may feel full.
- You may hear noise when the fluoroscope moves and takes images.
- You will be lying on a hard exam table while the radiologist takes the X-rays.
- You will be asked to hold your breath briefly when the X-rays are taken so that the images are not blurry.
- You will be asked to turn from side to side, and to hold different positions. At times, we may use a gloved hand or paddle to apply pressure to your abdomen.
What happens after the exam?

- You will be asked to wait while the radiologist reviews the pictures for quality. More X-rays will be done if needed. If the images are clear, you can dress and leave the exam room.
- You can resume eating as usual and take all your medicines, unless your provider tells you otherwise.
- Drink 4 to 8 glasses of water after your exam to help move the barium out of your body.
- Your stools may appear gray or white for 48 to 72 hours after your exam as your body clears the barium from your system.
- The barium can make it hard for you to move your bowels. If you do not have a bowel movement for more than 2 days after your exam, or you cannot pass gas, call your provider right away.

Who interprets the results and how do I get them?

A radiologist who is trained to interpret small bowel follow through images will review your images and send a report to your provider. The radiologist will talk with you briefly about your X-ray images. Your own provider will give you your full exam results.

You may also read your results on your eCare Results page. If you need copies of your images on disc, call Radiology Records at 206.598.6206. You and your provider will decide the next step, such as treatment for a problem, as needed.