

Barium Enema (Lower GI Exam)

How it works, what to expect, and how to get your results

A barium enema (lower GI exam) helps your doctor see the inside of your colon. This handout explains how the exam works, what to expect during the exam, and how to get your results.

What is the lower GI?

GI stands for *gastrointestinal*. It refers to the stomach and the intestines.

The *lower GI* is the large intestine (*colon*). The lower GI includes the *ascending colon*, *transverse colon*, *descending colon*, *sigmoid colon*, and the *rectum* (the last few inches of your colon).

What is a barium enema?

Barium is a liquid *contrast* agent. It is a thick, metallic substance that your body will not absorb.

A *barium enema* is also called a lower GI exam. This exam helps your doctor see the inside of your colon. It may also show the *appendix* (if present) and part of the small intestine.

This exam uses a special type of X-ray called *fluoroscopy*. These X-rays allow your radiologist to watch the barium as it moves through your colon.

How does the exam work?

First, we will place a small tube into your rectum. We will then place the liquid *barium* into your colon through this tube. The barium will coat the inside of your rectum, colon, and the lower part of your small intestine.

We will use fluoroscopy to pass small amounts of X-rays through your body. These X-rays will create detailed images of your colon as it moves.



An X-ray image of a lower gastrointestinal tract

How do I prepare for the exam?

- If you need to do anything special to prepare for your barium enema, we will give you detailed instructions.
- *If you were assigned female at birth:* Tell your provider if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, or if there is any chance you could be pregnant.

Plan Ahead

The date and time of your exam are reserved just for you. Please arrive on time. Allow plenty of time to get to the hospital and park. If you are late, we will still try to do your exam. But, your exam may be delayed or need to be rescheduled for another day.

If you need to reschedule your barium enema, please call the X-ray department at 206.598.6211.

How is the exam done?

- **Before** we begin the exam:
 - The radiologist or technologist will explain the exam and review rare problems that could occur.
 - *If you were assigned female at birth:* Tell the technologist if there is any chance you could be pregnant.
 - We will ask you to change into a hospital gown.
- You will then lie down on an exam table. We will take an X-ray to make sure your bowels are empty.
- The radiologist or technologist will place a small tube inside your rectum. They will put a mixture of the barium and water into your colon through this tube. Sometimes, we use a water and iodine mixture instead of barium.
- To help the barium coat the lining of your colon, we may also pass air through the tube.
- We will then take a series of X-rays.
- We may ask you to move during the exam to allow us to take pictures from many angles. The radiologist may request special views or close-up pictures.
- Once all the X-ray pictures are taken, most of the barium will be drawn back from your colon into a bag. We will ask you to use the bathroom to get rid of the rest of the barium and air.

- The technologist may take more pictures to see how well the barium has cleared from your colon.
- This exam usually takes 30 to 60 minutes. After it is done, you may dress in your own clothes and leave.

What will I feel during the exam?

- As the barium fills your colon, you will feel the need to have a bowel movement. You may feel pressure in your belly, or even some cramps. This is normal. The tip of the enema tube is designed to help you hold in the barium. Tell the technologist if you are having any trouble.
- During the exam, we will ask you to turn from side to side and to hold different positions. At times, we may put light pressure on your belly. If air is passed through the tube (see step 3 on page 2), the table you are lying on may be turned upright.

After Your Exam

- After a barium enema, you may have trouble moving your bowels. If you tend to be constipated, you may want to drink a large amount of fluid and to take a mild laxative after your exam.
- You may return to your normal diet and activities right away.
- Your stools may be white for about a day, as your body clears the barium from your system. Drink extra water for 24 hours after the exam to help your body get rid of the barium.
- Call your provider **right away** if 2 days have passed since your exam and you have not had a bowel movement, or you cannot pass gas through your rectum.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

- UWMC - Montlake Imaging Services: 206.598.6200
- UWMC - Northwest Imaging Services: 206.668.2073
- Harborview Radiology: 206.744.3105

Who interprets the results and how do I get them?

A radiologist who is trained to interpret lower GI exams will review the pictures and send a report to your provider. The radiologist will also talk with you about your test results after your exam. Your own provider will also talk with you about the results.

You and your provider will decide the next step, such as treatment for a problem, as needed.

You may also read your results on your MyChart page. If you need copies of your images on disc, call 206.598.6206.