

Upper GI Exam

What to expect and how to prepare

This handout explains how an upper GI exam works, how to prepare, what to expect, and how to get your results.

What is an upper GI exam?

GI stands for *gastrointestinal*. An upper GI exam is an X-ray exam of the top section of the *GI tract*. This includes the esophagus, stomach, and first part of the small intestine.

The exam uses a special type of X-ray called *fluoroscopy*. A fluoroscope takes moving images of the inside of your body.

How does the exam work?

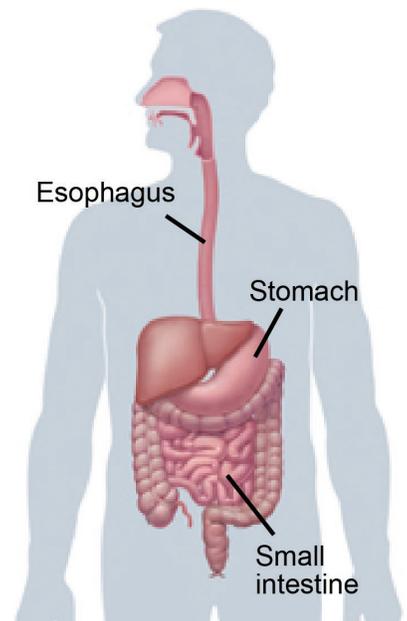
First, you will swallow a liquid *contrast agent* called *barium*. The barium coats the inside of your GI tract and appears bright white on the X-rays. This helps details of your GI tract show more clearly on the images.

We may also ask you to swallow baking soda crystals (*fizzies*) with liquid. These will create gas in your stomach. This helps the lining of your GI tract show more clearly in the X-ray images. This is called an *air-contrast* or *double-contrast* upper GI exam.

After you swallow the barium, the radiologist will use the fluoroscope to watch the barium flow through your upper GI tract. We will also take still X-rays.

How do I prepare?

Most patients have this exam because their primary care provider (PCP) has ordered it. Your PCP will give you details on how to prepare for your exam, as needed.



The upper GI tract includes the esophagus, stomach, and first part of the small intestine.

- Be sure to tell your PCP:
 - About any recent illnesses or other health issues
 - About any allergies you have to medicines
 - If you have ever had a reaction to contrast that contains iodine
- *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.

The Night Before

You may eat your evening meal as usual.

Exam Day

Starting 6 hours before your upper GI exam:

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

What can I expect?

- The exam will take about 30 minutes.
- We will ask you to change into a hospital gown and pants.
- We will ask you to remove jewelry, metal, and any plastic objects that could show up on the X-ray images.

How is the exam done?

- A technologist will help you get into position on an exam table.
- *If you were assigned female at birth:* **Before** the exam begins, tell the technologist if there is any chance you could be pregnant.
- The technologist will then take an X-ray. This is done to get a “baseline” image of your GI tract before you drink the barium or take the fizzies.
- We may then ask you to take the fizzies with liquid.
- The technologist will again help you get into position. We will ask you to drink liquid barium, which is like a thin milkshake.
- The radiologist will use the fluoroscope to watch the barium as it moves into your esophagus and stomach.

- When your upper GI tract is coated with the barium, we will take X-rays. We will ask you to stand up, then lie down on the exam table. The radiologist will take X-rays of your esophagus and stomach in both positions.
- We may ask you to drink more barium during the exam.
- After we have taken the X-rays, we will ask you to wait while the radiologist reviews the pictures for quality. We will do more X-rays if needed. If the images are clear, you may leave the exam room and get dressed.

What will I feel during the exam?

- The liquid barium has a berry flavor, but may taste a little chalky.
- If you take the fizzies, you may feel the need to burp. The radiologist or technologist will ask you to hold the burp. The gas in your stomach helps show more detail in the X-ray images.
- At times, we will ask you to:
 - Hold your breath and stay very still
 - Move into different positions while standing, and while lying on the exam table
 - Roll back and forth on the table
- You may hear noise when the fluoroscope moves and takes images.

What happens after the exam?

- You can resume eating as usual and take your medicines, unless your provider tells you otherwise.
- Drink 4 to 8 glasses of water a day for the next 3 days. This will help clear the barium from your body.
- Your stools may appear gray or white for 48 to 72 hours after your exam. This is because of the barium.
- If you are constipated, take a stool softener or laxative.
- If you drink alcohol or caffeine after your exam, you must also drink plenty of water. Otherwise, you could get constipated.
- **Call your provider** if it is more than 2 days after your exam and you have not had a bowel movement or cannot pass gas.

Who interprets the results? How do I get them?

A radiologist who is trained to interpret upper GI exams will review your images and send a report to your PCP. The radiologist may also talk with you briefly about your X-ray images. Your own PCP will give you your full exam results.

You and your PCP 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 Radiology Records at 206.598.6206.

Questions?

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

- UWMC - Montlake Imaging Services: 206.598.6200
- UWMC - Northwest Imaging Services: 206.668.2073
- Harborview Medical Center Imaging Services: 206.744.3105