

Lower GI Exam

About your exam

A lower GI or barium enema exam will allow your doctor to see the inside of your colon. This handout explains how the exam works, how it is done, how to prepare for it, what to expect during the exam, and how to get your results.

What does GI stand for?

GI stands for *gastrointestinal*. It refers to the stomach and the intestines. The *lower* GI is the large intestine (colon), which includes the *ascending* colon, *transverse* colon, *descending* colon, *sigmoid* colon, and the *rectum*.

What is a lower gastrointestinal tract radiography or barium enema?

Lower *gastrointestinal tract radiography*, also called a *barium enema* (BE), is an exam of all parts of the large intestine. The exam may also show the *appendix* (if it is present) and part of the small intestine.

Images are created by passing small amounts of X-rays through the body. *Fluoroscopy* uses X-rays to obtain images of an organ while it is moving and working.

How does the exam work?

Liquid barium, a *contrast material*, is placed into your colon through a tube in your rectum. Barium is a thick, metallic substance that your body will not absorb. It will coat the inside of your rectum, colon, and a part of your lower small intestine.

Small amounts of X-rays will pass through your body. We use a special X-ray film plate to create a detailed picture of the movement inside of your colon.



An X-ray of one patient's lower gastrointestinal tract

How should I prepare for the exam?

If you need to prepare in a special way for your lower GI exam, you will receive detailed instructions.

Please Arrive on Time

The date and time of your exam are reserved just for you. Please allow plenty of time to get to the hospital and to 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.

Please call the X-ray department at 206-598-6211 if you cannot keep your appointment.

How is the exam done?

The radiologist or technologist will talk with you about details of the exam and can review rare *contraindications* (problems that need special attention). A lower GI study usually takes 30 to 60 minutes.

1. You will lie down on a table, and a picture will be taken to make sure your bowels are empty.
2. The radiologist or technologist will place a small tube inside your rectum. Then they will put a mixture of the barium contrast material and water into your colon through this tube. Sometimes they may use a water and iodine mixture instead of barium to see your colon.
3. To help the barium coat the lining of your colon, air may also be passed through the tube.
4. A series of pictures will then be taken.
5. You may need to move during the exam to allow the radiologist or technologist to get views of your colon from all angles. The radiologist will monitor the barium, and will take or request special views or close-up pictures.
6. 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.
7. The technologist may take more pictures to help the doctor see how well the barium has cleared from your colon. After that, you may go home.

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 abdomen, or even some cramps. This is all normal, and most people can put up with the mild

discomfort. The tip of the enema tube is designed to help you hold in the barium. If you are having any trouble, tell the technologist.

- During the exam, you will be asked to turn from side to side, and to hold several different positions. At times, pressure may be applied to your abdomen. 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 have a tendency 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.
- If you do not have a bowel movement for more than 2 days after your exam, or you cannot pass gas through your rectum, call your doctor right away.

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 doctor. The radiologist will also talk with you about your test results after your exam.

Based on your results, you and your primary care doctor will decide the next step, such as treatment for a problem, as needed.

Questions?

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

Imaging Services:
206-598-6200