

Education

Air Contrast Barium Enema

What is an air contrast barium enema?

An air contrast barium enema is a procedure in which x-rays, barium, and air are used to examine your large intestine (colon). Barium is a fluid that shows up clearly on an x-ray.

When is it used?

This procedure is used to look for problems in the large intestine, such as:

- diverticula (weak areas or pouches in the wall of your intestine)
- polyps (growths that project from the lining of the colon into the space inside the bowel)
- ulcerative colitis (inflammation of the lining of the intestine)
- cancer.

In most cases the only alternative to the barium enema is a colonoscopy. A colonoscopy is an exam of the colon with a slim, flexible, lighted tube.

How do I prepare for an air contrast barium enema?

- Follow your health care provider's instructions for what you should or should not eat or drink before the procedure. Because the large intestine needs to be empty, you will have a special diet for a day or two before the exam. Usually you will need to use a laxative or enema recommended by your health care provider.
- Wear loose-fitting, comfortable clothes that are easy to get in and out of.

What happens during the procedure?

You will lie on a table. An x-ray technologist may take a regular x-ray of your abdomen. A lubricated tube will be inserted into your anus and rectum. The barium solution is passed through the tube into your rectum and colon. After the barium has passed through your intestine, the examiner will carefully pump some air into your intestine and then take x-rays from several different angles. You may feel a strong urge to move your bowels. Take long, deep breaths through your mouth to relax.

You can go to the bathroom after several x-rays have been taken. After you have a bowel movement, more x-rays may be taken.

What happens after the procedure?

A small amount of barium passes from your bowel after the procedure. The rest of the barium is passed with your bowel movements. You may have cramping until all the extra air has passed from your bowel.

The radiologist will send a report to your health care provider. Ask your provider when and how you will get the results and when to come back for a checkup.

What are the benefits of this procedure?

This procedure helps your health care provider diagnose problems of the lower intestine and rectum.

What are the risks associated with this procedure?

- You may feel weak and dizzy from the enema.
- Rarely, the wall of the intestine may tear if it is weak. If this occurs, you may need surgery.
- Rarely, you may develop an infection.

You should ask your health care provider how these risks apply to you.

When should I call the health care provider?

Call your provider right away if:

- You develop a fever.
- You have abdominal pain or a feeling of weakness that gets worse.

Call your provider during office hours if:

- You have questions about the procedure or its result.
- You want to make another appointment.

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