UW Medicine

Esophagram

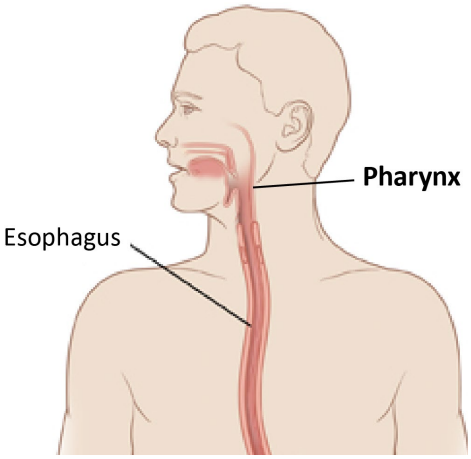
How to prepare and what to expect

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

Scan this QR code with your phone camera for a digital copy of this handout.

What is an esophagram?

An *esophagram* studies your swallowing process and how well your esophagus is working. The esophagus is the tube that carries food from your mouth to your stomach.



The pharynx and esophagus are part of the upper digestive system.

How does the exam work?

We will ask you to swallow a liquid *contrast agent* called *barium*. This liquid is thick like a milkshake.

The barium will coat the inside of your esophagus. When you swallow the barium, the radiologist will use a *fluoroscope* to watch it flow through your esophagus. The barium will appear bright white on the X-rays and show clear details of the esophagus.

We may also ask you to swallow crystals with water. This creates gas and helps improve the images. This is called an **air-contrast** or **double-contrast** esophagram.

How do I prepare?

- Tell your radiology provider about:
  - Recent illnesses or other health issues.
  - Allergies you may have to contrast or other medications.
- Tell your radiology provider if there is any chance you are pregnant.

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The Night Before Your Exam

- You may eat your evening meal as usual.

Exam Day

Starting 6 hours before your esophagram:

- 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.
- Before the exam, tell the technologist if there is any chance you may be pregnant.
- Before the exam begins, we will ask you to:
    - Change into a gown.
    - Jewelry, glasses, and any metal objects.

How is the exam done?

- The technologist will tell you how the exam will happen.
- The exam should take about 30 minutes.
- We will ask you to drink a cup of liquid barium, which is like a thin, berry-flavored milkshake. It may taste a little chalky.
- You will first stand up, then lie down, as the radiologist takes X-rays of your esophagus.
- The technologist will help you get into position on an exam table.
- The radiologist will use the fluoroscope to watch your esophagus as you swallow. We will take images as the barium coats the lining of your esophagus.
- The technologist will help place you in various positions during the exam so we can view your esophagus from different angles.
- We may ask you to drink more barium during the exam.
- You may hear noise when the fluoroscope moves and takes images.

What will I feel during the exam?

- An esophagram should not cause any discomfort.

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What happens after the exam?

- 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.
- You can resume eating as usual and take your medicines unless your primary care provider (PCP) tells you otherwise.
- For the next 3 days, drink 4 to 8 glasses of water a day (32 to 64 ounces). This will help clear the barium from your body.
- Your stool may appear gray or white for 48 to 72 hours after your exam as your body clears the barium from your system.
- Avoid drinking alcohol or caffeine after your exam, since they can cause hard stools (constipation). If you do drink alcohol or caffeine, you must also drink extra water.
- If you have constipation, take a stool softener or a laxative.
- If you have not had a bowel movement for more than 2 days after your exam, or if you cannot pass gas, **call your doctor right away.**

Who interprets the results and how do I get them?

The radiologist will talk with you briefly about your X-ray images. A radiologist who is trained to interpret esophagrams will do a full review of your images and send a report to your PCP or referring provider.

Your PCP or referring provider will give you your exam results. They 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.

If you have questions, call:

- ❑ **UWMC - Montlake:** 206.598.6200
- ❑ **UWMC - Northwest:** 206.668.2073
- ❑ **Harborview Medical Center:** 206.744.3105

For scheduling, call:

- ❑ **UWMC - Montlake:** 206.598.6211
- ❑ **UWMC - Northwest:** 206.598.6211
- ❑ **Harborview Medical Center:** 206.744.3105

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