Barium enemas are used to examine the patient’s colon for abnormalities, including cancer and pre-cancerous polyps.

In a single-contrast barium enema a special liquid containing barium is inserted into the colon. In a double-contrast barium enema barium and air are inserted into the colon. The double-contrast technique allows for better detection of polyps in the colon.

Before the procedure, the colon must be cleaned out with a laxative and/or a regular enema. Then, a lubricated tube is placed in the rectum and the barium and air are injected. This may cause feelings of bloating and discomfort, but taking slow, deep breaths may help. X-rays are taken as the barium enters and leaves the body. Views may be taken with the patient lying in several different positions. The whole procedure lasts 30-60 minutes. After the procedure, the patient should drink fluids, rest and possibly take a cleansing enema. Complications are very rare but may occur if there is an allergic reaction to the barium or tearing of the colon.  

For more information about colorectal cancer visit the Winship Cancer Institute of Emory University.