

Greenwich Hospital

What is a Lumbar Puncture or Spinal Tap

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is a lumbar puncture or spinal tap?

A lumbar puncture, or spinal tap, is a procedure doctors use to remove a small amount of the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord for testing. This fluid is called cerebrospinal fluid. The cerebrospinal fluid is usually clear and contains small amounts of proteins and sugar.

Why is a lumbar puncture ordered?

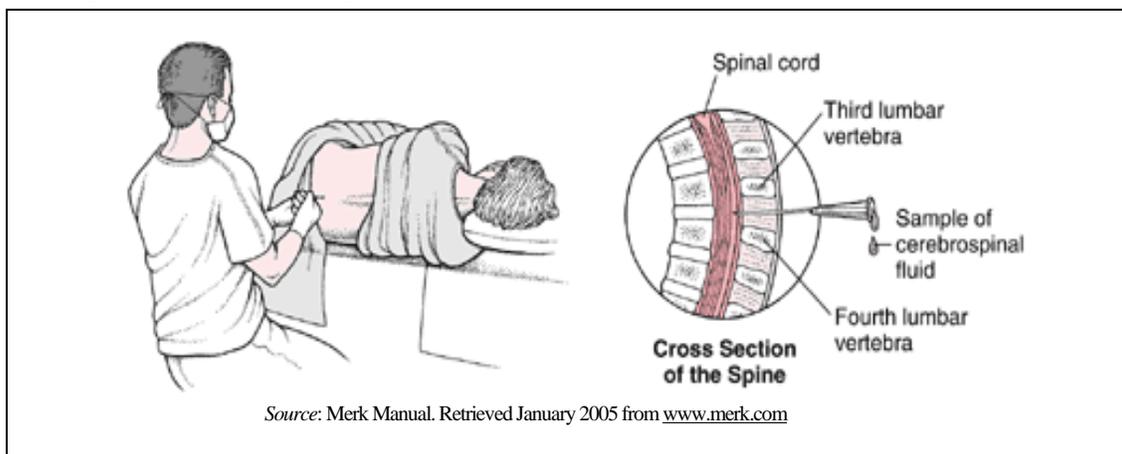
A lumbar puncture may be ordered to diagnose some of the following illnesses/conditions:

- Meningitis
- Leukemia, lymphoma, or other cancers
- Neurological diseases, such as multiple sclerosis or the cause of recurrent seizures
- Unexplained fever

A lumbar puncture may also be ordered to place chemotherapy medications into the spinal fluid.

Is there any special preparation before the procedure?

Notify your doctor ahead of time if you are taking any type of blood thinning medication, called anticoagulants. Examples of these medications include aspirin, Coumadin (warfarin), and Lovenox (heparin). Your doctor may want to stop these medications prior to the day of the lumbar puncture.



Source: Merk Manual. Retrieved January 2005 from www.merk.com

How is a lumbar puncture performed?

- You will be positioned either on your side or sitting upright.
- An antiseptic will be used to clean the area of the back where the procedure will be performed.
- The skin will then be numbed with a medication called a local anesthetic.
- Once numb, a small hollow needle will be inserted into your lower back through the space between your vertebrae until it enters the space that contains the spinal fluid.
- A small sample of the spinal fluid is removed for testing.
- The needle is then withdrawn.
- A small bandage is applied to the insertion site.
- This procedure may be done either at the bedside or in the radiology department.

Is there any special care after the procedure?

Your doctor may ask you to increase your fluid intake and to lie flat for two to four hours after the lumbar puncture. The small bandage on your back at the insertion site can be removed 24 hours after the procedure.

Are there any risks involved with this procedure?

Some people develop a headache after this procedure. To minimize the headache, it is important to lie flat after the lumbar puncture and to increase fluid intake (unless you are on a restriction). The headache may start up to 12 hours after the procedure. If it lasts more than a day, call your physician.

References: JAMA Patient Page. Retrieved January 2005 from <http://www.medem.com>
Merk Manual. Retrieved January 2005 from <http://www.merk.com>

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