

Health Facts

Lumbar puncture

What is a lumbar puncture?

A lumbar puncture, also called an LP or a spinal tap, is a procedure that involves the insertion of a needle into your child's lower back. The needle removes a sample of the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. This fluid is called cerebrospinal fluid or CSF.

Why does my child need a lumbar puncture?

This test is usually performed to find out if a child has an infection of the lining or the fluid around the brain. This infection is called meningitis. Sometimes, a lumbar puncture may be performed to diagnose other neurological conditions and your doctor will explain this to you if this applies to your child.

How is a lumbar puncture performed?

The lumbar puncture is performed under sterile conditions. The doctor will sterilise your child's lower back and insert a small needle into the space between the bones in the back. A nurse may hold or support your child to prevent any movement. Drops of the spinal fluid are collected and sent to the laboratory.

Will my child feel pain? What possible problems can occur?

The procedure is uncomfortable and babies and small children are generally more distressed by the staff holding them in the correct position. Your child may be offered some medicine for pain or to assist them to remain calm.

Occasionally, it may take more than one attempt to obtain the spinal fluid.

A small number of children may complain of a headache or back ache after the lumbar puncture and this may last for up to two days.

Serious complications such as spinal cord damage, nerve damage, bleeding and infection are extremely rare. Certain children may have more risk factors to consider and your doctor will discuss this with you if it applies to your child.

What happens after the lumbar puncture?

- Your child will have a small dressing on their lower back covering the needle insertion site. This dressing should stay on for 24 hours.
- Your child may be cuddled or held and does not have to remain lying down unless they prefer to do so.
- If your child complains of a headache or backache, it may be appropriate to provide them with some pain relief such as Panadol (Paracetamol).
- If their headache does not go away, advise the hospital doctors or nurses caring for them, or visit your GP.

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