Fluoroscopic Guided Lumbar Puncture / Spinal Tap

Your doctor has ordered a test for you called a lumbar puncture (also known as a spinal tap). This handout explains what will happen before, during, and after the test. Your nurse will go over this sheet with you. Please ask questions. If you have questions or concerns after you go home, please call the numbers listed at the end of this handout.

Please let your doctor or nurse know if: you are allergic to Novocain / Lidocaine, you have had previous back surgery, or if you are currently taking a blood thinner.

What Is a Lumbar Puncture?

A lumbar puncture involves placing a needle between the bones of the lower back, about 2 inches below the end of the spinal cord. The purpose of the spinal tap is to test the fluid, known as cerebrospinal fluid or CSF, which flows around the spinal cord and the brain. This clear colorless fluid acts as a shock absorber for the central nervous system. Tests on CSF can tell many things about your body.

Most of these procedures are done at the bedside or in the clinic. The use of fluoroscopy allows the doctor to guide their needle using X-rays into the appropriate position. This can potentially make the procedure less difficult; however, it does not mean that there will be less pain or decrease the risk of complications.

Before the Procedure

1. Please arrange to have someone drive you home.
2. Bring along any medicines you will need to take during the day including acetaminophen (Tylenol®).
3. Before the exam, your doctor may order blood tests to check your body’s ability to control bleeding, depending on your medical history and current medications. This will allow the doctors in Radiology to know that it is safe to perform the procedure.

The Procedure

You will be asked to lie down either on your stomach or side on the fluoroscopy table. You must remain as still as you can during the procedure.

The doctor will decide where to insert the needle by evaluating the spaces between the bones in your lower back using X-rays. The doctor will put on sterile gloves and clean your back. Once your back is clean, a sterile towel will be draped over your back. Do not touch your back or the sterile towel.
Next you will receive a shot to numb the site where the puncture will be. This is much like the dentist giving you Novocain before filling your teeth. The site will become numb in less than a minute. Then the doctor will insert a needle between the bones at the chosen spot. You will feel pressure as the doctor inserts the needle. Let the doctor or nurse know if you feel any pain. Breathe deeply and slowly.

The doctor may attach a special gauge to the needle to measure the fluid pressure. Then, some of the CSF will drain into several tubes. The CSF will come out through the needle drop by drop, much like a dripping faucet. Once enough fluid has been taken for testing, the needle will be pulled out. Your back will be cleaned and a band-aid will be placed over the site. The entire test will last about 30 to 45 minutes.

After the Test

You will need to lie flat in bed for up to 1 hour so that you don’t get a headache. If you are an outpatient you will need to be watched in the Radiology Recovery Unit. You may lie on your side, back, or abdomen, but do not lift your head for long periods of time.

We encourage drinking plenty of fluid following the test and over the next 1 – 2 days. These fluids will help to replace the CSF fluid that was taken for tests. Your nurse will check the puncture site for redness or swelling before you leave.

Results

The length of time before you have the results of your test varies. Some results can be obtained in 1 to 2 days. Others may take weeks. Results will be sent directly to the doctor that ordered your test – ask in the recovery unit if you are not sure.

Home Care

- Keep resting for the remainder of the day. Plan to do quiet things like reading, watching TV, etc.
- Recline in bed or on a sofa, until the next morning.
- Keep drinking plenty of fluids. It is best if they contain caffeine.
- The morning after the test, you may take a bath or shower and remove the band-aid. You may also resume your normal routine.
- If you get a headache after starting activity, return to resting, lay flat and increase your intake of fluids with caffeine.
- You may take any over the counter analgesics (ibuprofen, Tylenol®, naproxen) you may have at home for any discomfort that you have.
- No heavy lifting, twisting, bending or strenuous exercise for one week to allow the puncture site to heal.

When to Call the Doctor

- A severe headache that is not relieved with aspirin or acetaminophen (Tylenol®).
- Dizziness
- A stiff neck
- Nausea or vomiting
Phone Numbers

If you should need to speak to someone regarding the procedure call the Neuroradiology Clinical Program Coordinator at (608) 263-6871. After hours or weekends, please call the hospital paging operator at (608) 262-2122 and ask to be connected to the Neuroradiology Fellow on-call.

If you have a question regarding the results, please call the doctor that ordered the study.