

Parent Information: Lumbar Puncture

What is a lumbar puncture?

This is a test carried out to obtain a sample of the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. The fluid is usually referred to as CSF (cerebrospinal fluid).

How is a lumbar puncture done?

Under sterile conditions, a needle is inserted in the lower back between two spinal bones. CSF then comes out through the needle and is collected for testing.

Why does my baby need a lumbar puncture?

A lumbar puncture (LP) is usually done to rule out meningitis, an infection of the layers of tissue covering the brain. It is often carried out at the same time as a 'septic screen' where the doctors are trying to rule out generalised infection as a cause of illness. Very occasionally a lumbar puncture is done to remove excess CSF.

Are there any risks for my baby having a lumbar puncture?

- Your baby may feel some discomfort, not only from the needle but also from being held in a curled up position. The nurses will monitor your baby closely and stop the procedure to allow your baby to recover
- There is a slight risk of infection because the needle breaks the skin's surface
- There is a small risk of minor bleeding.

What will happen to my baby if a lumbar puncture is needed?

The procedure can be uncomfortable so the nurse may give your baby some pain relief. In some units a local anaesthetic cream may be used to numb the area.

The nurse will place your baby on his/her side and position him/her to make it easier for the doctor to locate the site where the needle will be placed. The nurse will remain with your baby and provide comfort throughout the procedure.

After cleaning and covering the back, a needle is inserted and the CSF collected into containers and sent to the laboratory for examination. After this the needle will be removed and the needle site sealed with a clear dressing spray and a spot plaster.

How will the infection be treated?

If the LP is done for infection reasons your baby will be started on a course of antibiotics immediately to ensure that any infection is treated. These may be used for 48 hours or longer depending on the results of the test.

What problems can arise with a lumbar puncture?

- Some babies do not tolerate being curled-up – the LP will be postponed
- It is not always possible to obtain CSF. The LP may need to be attempted again later.
- Sometimes it is not possible to get CSF at all, in which case the baby will receive antibiotics based on the clinical condition and the results of other tests.

When will you know the results of the LP?

Part of the LP test will be back from the laboratory within a few hours and the doctors will let you know these initial results, what they may mean and what action needs to be taken. The final LP results may take a few days to come back but the doctors will update you when the results are available.

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