

# What is a Lumbar Puncture?

A lumbar puncture—also called a spinal tap—is a test that removes a small amount of cerebrospinal fluid from your lower back. This fluid surrounds and protects your spinal cord and brain.

*“The purpose of doing a lumbar puncture, usually there are about three different possibilities. One is we're looking at infection, meningitis or encephalitis. The other would be increased pressure in the brain called hydrocephalus, increased pressure that's caused by any number of things. And the third, we often do them as a neurologist for multiple sclerosis or MS.”*

A lumbar puncture is also done to test for certain cancers that may involve the brain or spinal cord. Before the test, tell your provider if you have a bleeding disorder, or if you take any blood thinners. You may have to stop these drugs a few days before the test. When you arrive, you'll remove your shirt or blouse and change into a gown.

*“First, you'll be curling up into a fetal position.”*

Then, you'll lie on a table with your knees pulled up to your chest. Or, you might sit on the edge of the table and lean forward. These positions make it easier to insert the needle. Your back will be cleaned with an antiseptic and a local anesthetic injected to numb the area.

*“Then we let that sit for two, three, four minutes to take effect and numb up. Then we put the spinal needle in which looks scary but isn't.”*

The thin, hollow needle is inserted between two of the bones—or vertebrae—in your lower spine. You may feel some pressure when the needle goes in, but you'll need to hold very still.

*“There it is...and the fluid comes out.”*

The fluid will collect into a small container. Then the needle is removed, and a bandage is placed over the injection site. The test takes about 15 minutes.

Afterward, you'll lie down for about an hour to reduce your risk of a headache. Then you can go home. Take it easy for the next day. Drink lots of fluids to replace what you lost during the test.

Call your provider if you have any side effects including fever numbness or tingling in your legs, bleeding or pain at the injection site, trouble urinating, or headaches.

*“If your results are normal, you may not need to do anything else, but if the test picks up a problem, you may need additional tests. You should be sure and ask your provider so that they can give you guidance as to additional tests, treatments or any other follow up that you may need.”*