



A guide to...

Lumbar Puncture

Patient Information

Children's Emergency Department (CED)
Watford General Hospital



We would like to perform an investigation, known as a lumbar puncture, on your child. We do not perform this unless it is absolutely necessary, and we believe that it is necessary to perform this on your child today.

What is it?

Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) is fluid that circulates around the brain and spinal cord, providing it with nourishment and protection. The lumbar puncture procedure involves the insertion of small needle into the base of your baby / child's spine (lower back) to obtain a sample of this fluid; there is a large fluid filled space in this location which allows us to take some fluid without causing any trauma to the spinal cord itself.

Why do you have to do it?

The CSF can help us to diagnose or manage a variety of conditions, however we usually perform it to tell us whether your child has meningitis (infection of the lining of the brain). By looking at the cells contained within this fluid, we can identify if there is an infection present and also exactly what type of bug is causing the infection — this then helps us to know the best antibiotics to give and how long they are needed for.

There may be times where we think your baby / child is too unwell to have a lumbar puncture straight away and, in this instance, we will give antibiotics immediately that cover the most common types of bugs that cause meningitis. We would then look to perform the lumbar puncture over the next day or so.

Does it hurt?

The procedure can be uncomfortable, similar to performing a blood test. Most babies will be upset by being held in one position more than the actual procedure itself. To minimise discomfort, we will give pain relief such as sucrose, or a dummy if they have one, to help.

How long will it take?

The procedure usually takes no more than 30 minutes to perform.

This can be a distressing procedure for parents to watch as there is little that you can do to provide comfort — as it is performed in very clean conditions, you are not able to touch or hold your baby whilst it is being done; for this reason, our advice is for your not to be present whilst we perform it. This can also help us to increase the chance of success as it is a difficult procedure to perform, requiring focus and concentration. However, you are always more than welcome to be present — please do not feel worried to ask.

Is it safe?

A lumbar puncture is a safe test and the risk of any serious complications such as bleeding, infection or damage to the nerves is extremely low. More common risks are that we are not able to get the sample that we need, or that we have to try more than once. Today, we will only try twice, and then stop if unsuccessful.

Can I refuse?

You can refuse to have this procedure performed on your baby / child, however it may have implications for their care going forwards as we will not be able to give specifically targeted treatments.

Caring for your child

It will likely feel sore at the bottom of your child's back — like a bruise — so be mindful when changing their nappy or moving them. If they are in any discomfort, then we will gladly give pain relieving medicine such as paracetamol.

Some older children report headaches after this procedure. If your child appears in any discomfort we will treat accordingly without hesitation.

If you need this leaflet in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01923 217 187** or email **westherts.pals@nhs.uk**



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