NATIONWIDE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL℠

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SPINAL TAP

A spinal tap or LP (lumbar puncture) measures the pressure in the spinal canal. It may be done to remove a small amount of spinal fluid for examination or to give medicine into the spinal canal.

HOW THE TEST IS DONE

About 1 to 2 hours before the test, a small amount of cream will be placed on your child's back and covered with a bandage. This cream, called EMLA® cream, will numb your child's skin. Just before the test, a small amount of numbing medicine may be injected into the skin. This may sting at first.

- The doctor or nurse practitioner will have your child lie down and "curl up in a ball" on a padded table in the treatment or exam room, or sit bending over a pillow (Picture 1). It is important for your child to bend as much as possible.
- Your child's doctor may let a parent be in the room during the procedure.
- Medicine to help your child relax may be given. Your child will be checked often by healthcare professionals during and after the test.
- The doctor or nurse will feel your child's back and choose a space between the bones of the lower part of the spine to insert the needle. A cotton ball soaked in iodine will be used to wash this spot on the skin. This may feel cold. After the skin is washed, some towels will be put around the clean spot on the skin where the test will be done. It is very important that your child holds very still during the test. A nurse will hold your child to remind him not to move.
- After the skin is numb, a needle will be inserted into the spinal canal. Your child will still feel pressure as the needle is put in, but it should not hurt. The doctor or nurse may ask your child to straighten out. A small amount of spinal fluid that looks like water will drip into sample tubes.
- The needle will be removed, and a band-aid will be placed over the spot where the test was done. The fluid in the tubes will be sent to the lab for testing.

Picture 1 Getting ready to have a spinal tap.

AFTER THE TEST

Your child may be asked to lie flat for a little while to reduce the chance of getting a headache. Reading to him and quiet play will help him stay flat in bed. The spinal tap site should be checked regularly for bleeding or wetness. The site should be kept clean and dry. The band-aid should stay in place for 24 hours and then be removed. Your child should not take a tub bath or shower while the band-aid is in place.

The doctor will explain the laboratory report and discuss the plan of treatment with you.

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