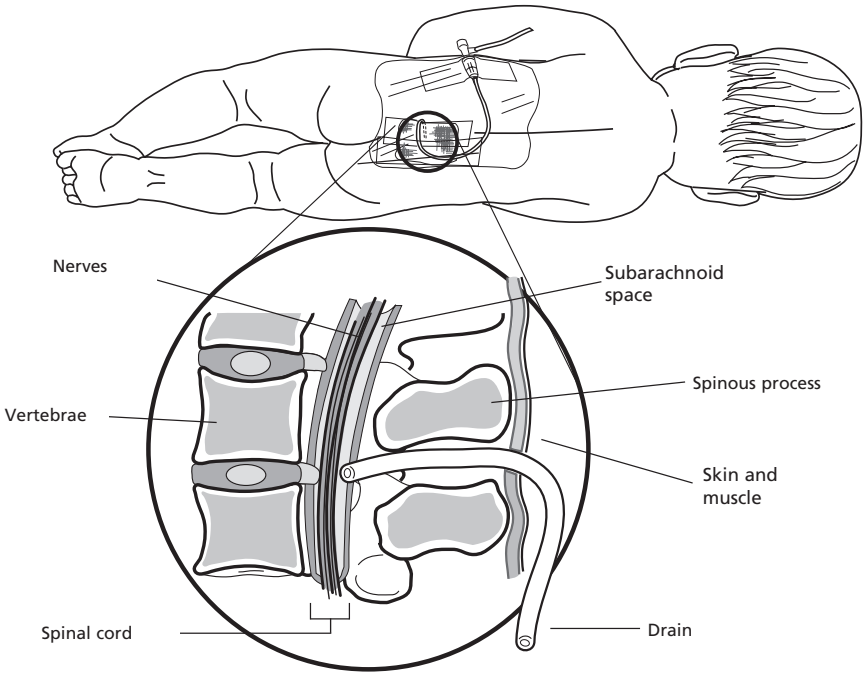
Let's Talk About...

Lumbar drain



A lumbar drain is a small, flexible tube placed in the lower back (lumbar) area. The tube drains the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord; this relieves pressure. It may be used to drain and assess cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) for many different reasons. Talk to your child's doctor or nurse to find out why your child has the drain.

How does a lumbar drain work?

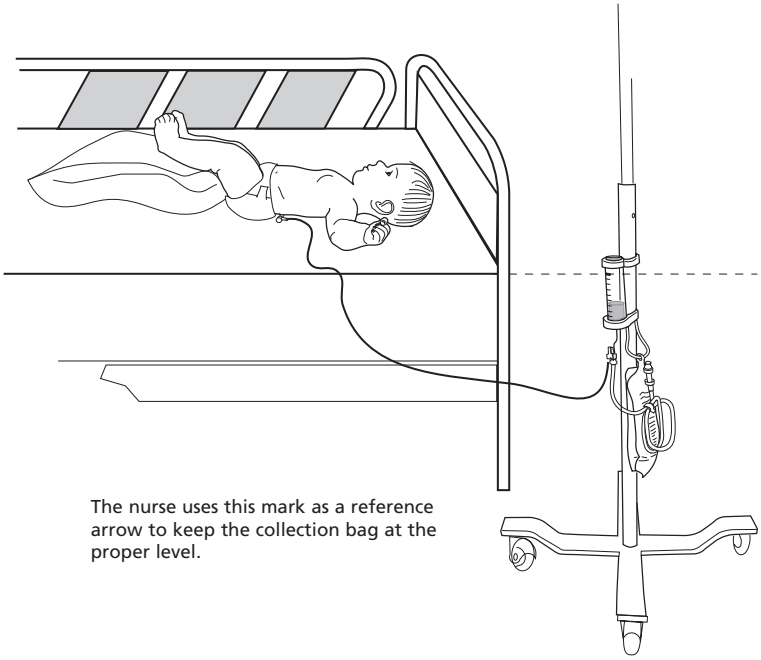
Doctors will place your child's lumbar drain during surgery. Your child will receive medicines to help him sleep during the surgery. The doctor makes a small opening in the skin of the lower back. Then the doctor places the tube in the subarachnoid space of the lumbar area (see illustration above). This allows extra fluid to drain, which relieves pressure on the brain. Finally, the doctor stitches the tube in place.

A drainage system is attached to the tubing. This system allows extra CSF to drain into a collection bag. The collection bag is hung on a pole, and specific pressure levels are set to keep the pressure correct (see illustration on back).

It is very important that the height of the collection bag not be changed, and that your child's head is not raised or lowered without a nurse's help. The settings on the system must also be changed only by a nurse or doctor to make sure the right amount of fluid drains. While the drain is in place, your child may have to stay in bed and be closely supervised to keep him safe. Talk with your nurse or doctor about what activities your child can or cannot do.

The nurse watches and records the amount of fluid that collects in the bag and will empty it often. The nurse assures the drain site has a secure dressing. The drain is very carefully leveled so that the right amount of CSF will drain. It is very important to call your nurse when one of the following occurs:

- Your child needs to change positions, such as sitting up or lying down.



- Your child needs to use the bathroom or wants to go for a walk.
- Your child feels sick to his stomach or vomits.
- Your child cries more or is fussier than usual.

Also, call your nurse if…

- Your child lets you know about a headache or has a headache that gets worse.
- Your child is overly sleepy or hard to wake up.
- The lumbar tube is pulled out.
- The drainage system comes apart in any way.

Are there any side effects?

After a lumbar drain is placed, your child may experience:

- **New emotions.** Your child may be angry, scared, confused, or think the lumbar drain is ugly. Be honest with your child in explaining the need for the lumbar drain. Try to be supportive and sensitive to your child's fears and self-image. If he continues to need support, contact the unit's child life specialist. If you or your child have questions, contact the nurse or doctor.
- **A headache.** Usually headaches are relieved after the lumbar drain is placed. If they continue, they are usually relieved with acetaminophen (Tylenol®). Sometimes stronger pain medicines are used for severe headaches.
- **Vomiting.** Vomiting is common after surgery. If your child is vomiting, his diet will be changed to clear liquids and slowly progress to solids when foods do not make him vomit. If vomiting continues, contact your nurse.
- **Activity.** Your child may be upset that his activity is restricted while the drain is in place. Explain that this is temporary in order to protect the drain from accidentally being pulled out. Contact your unit's child life specialist for activities to do while your child's activity level is limited.

How is the lumbar drain removed?

When the doctor removes the lumbar drain, he will remove the stitches and then gently slip the tube out. The doctor uses a stitch or two to close the opening. The stitch is removed during your child's follow-up (doctor) visit.

Discharge

Once the drain is taken out, it is a good idea to keep your child flat for one to two hours to prevent a headache. Until the body has sealed the inside opening on its own, the CSF can leak and cause a headache when moving around. Lying quietly helps the body to seal the hole. Ask your doctor for specific information about your child leaving the hospital.

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