

Myelogram

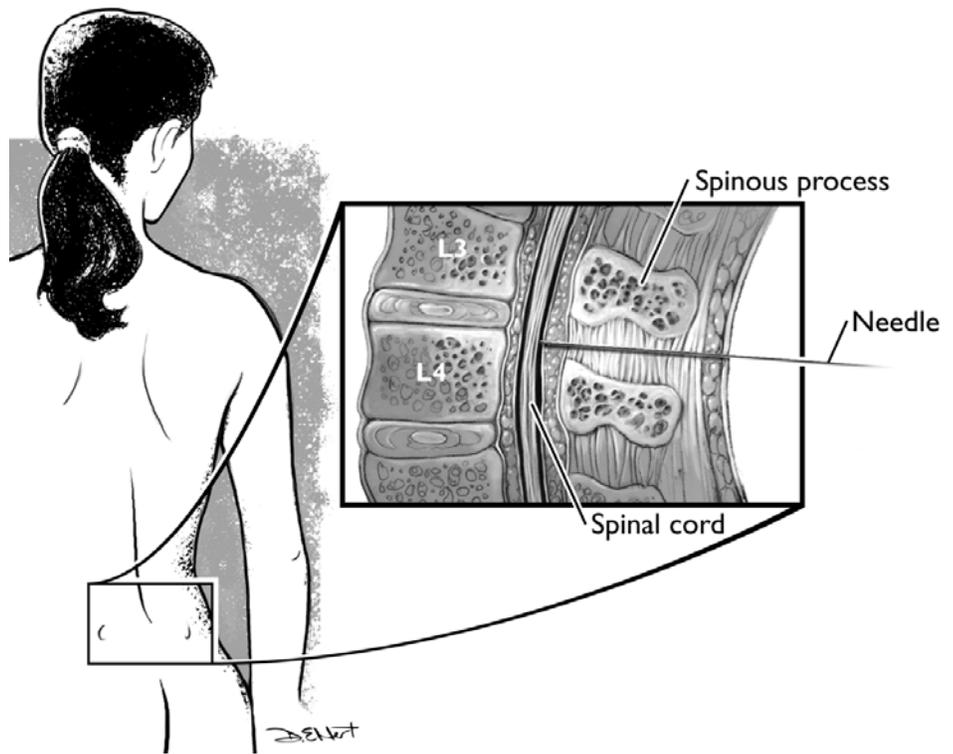
How to prepare and what to expect

A myelogram is an exam used to find problems of the spinal cord, the spinal canal, and the spinal nerve roots. This handout explains how to prepare for the exam, how it works, how it is done, what to expect during the exam, and how to get your results.

What is a myelogram?

A myelogram is an X-ray exam of the spinal cord and the space around it (the *subarachnoid space*). It provides detailed pictures of the spinal cord, spinal canal, and spinal nerve roots. The pictures show if there is damage in these tissues caused by disease or trauma.

A myelogram is often done when other tests – such as *computed tomography* (CT) scans or *magnetic resonance imaging* (MRI) – have not answered all our questions about your health issue. Your myelogram will be followed by a CT scan.



Cross-section of a spine with a needle inserted into the spinal canal.

How should I prepare for the exam?

- If you take blood-thinning medicine such as Coumadin (warfarin), Plavix, or Lovenox, talk with your primary care provider (PCP) about stopping it before your exam and restarting it after the exam.
- If you take insulin or pills for diabetes, check with your PCP about changing your dose during the time you are not allowed to eat. Please check your glucose level before you arrive for your exam.
- If you take muscle relaxants or medicines for depression, nausea, or ADHD, talk with your PCP about not taking the medicine for 48 hours before and 24 hours after your exam.
- Plan to have a responsible adult drive you home after your exam. For your safety, you may not drive until the day after your myelogram. If you take a bus or taxi home, you must have a responsible adult ride with you.

On the Day of Your Exam

- Make sure a responsible adult is available to drive you home after your exam.
- **Starting 6 hours before your exam:** Do **not** eat anything. You may have clear fluids such as water or tea; grape, apple, or cranberry juice; and Jell-O and popsicles.
- **Starting 2 hours before your exam:** Do **not** drink anything. If you need to take medicines, take them with only a small sip of water.
- Bring a list of your medicines with you when you come for your exam.
- You may need to have blood work done on the day of your exam.

How does the exam work?

The subarachnoid space is a fluid-filled area around the spinal canal, the spinal cord and nerve roots. The fluid in this space is called *cerebrospinal fluid*. This fluid cushions and protects the spinal cord.

For a myelogram, a substance called *contrast* is injected through a needle that is placed in your subarachnoid space. The contrast contains iodine. It outlines parts of the spine that usually cannot be seen on normal X-rays. X-rays are then taken as the contrast flows into the space.

You will be lying on a table for your myelogram. This table can be tilted to make the contrast run up and down your spine and around the nerve roots in the spinal cord.

What can I expect?

- A myelogram may be done in the Radiology department.
- You will lie face down on the X-ray table. A type of X-ray called *fluoroscopy* will project pictures of your spine onto a screen.
- The radiologist will clean your skin and inject a *local anesthetic* (numbing medicine) where a needle will be inserted.
- Most times, you will be asked to lie on your stomach with a pillow under your abdomen. You will need to stay in this position for about 45 minutes.
- If needed, a small amount of cerebrospinal fluid will be withdrawn for lab studies.
- Contrast material will be injected and the X-ray table will be slowly tilted. You will be asked to lie as still as you can while the table is tilted. A footrest and straps or supports will keep you from sliding on the table.
- The flow of contrast will show on the fluoroscopy. X-rays are taken while you are lying face down.
- The exam will focus on the area of your back or neck where you are feeling symptoms.
- If needed, a CT scan may be done right after your myelogram, while the contrast is still in your spinal canal. This blend of imaging studies is known as a *CT myelogram*.
- A myelogram usually takes 30 to 60 minutes. The CT scan adds another 5 to 10 minutes to the total exam time.
- After the myelogram, you will go to a short-stay area in the hospital for about 4 to 6 hours. Nurses will monitor you during this time. After that, you may go home.

What will I feel during the exam?

- You will feel a brief sting when local anesthetic is injected.
- You will feel slight pressure as the spinal needle is inserted. You may feel a sharp pain from time to time as the needle is placed.
- When the contrast is injected, you may feel some pressure or warmth. You may have a headache, flushing, or nausea after the injection.

What can I expect after the exam?

- **For 8 hours:**
 - Rest quietly at home.
 - You can sit in a chair for short periods and get up to use the bathroom during this time.
 - If you lie in bed, have the head of the bed raised at least 30 degrees.
 - Do **not** bend over during this time.
 - You may have a headache. You may take acetaminophen (Tylenol) for pain.
- **For 24 hours:** Drink at least 8 glasses (8 ounces each) of fluid such as juice, water, or a sports drink.
- **For 2 days:** Do **not** take a bath, sit in a hot tub, or go swimming. Soaking your body in water increases the risk of infection. It is OK to shower.
- **For 3 days:**
 - Do **not** lift anything that weighs more than 10 pounds. (A gallon of milk weighs more than 8 pounds.)
 - Avoid doing anything that makes you breathe harder or makes your heart beat faster.
- You may return to work the day after your exam, as long as you do not need to do any heavy lifting.

Who interprets the results and how do I get them?

A radiologist trained to interpret myelograms will review your exam results and send a report to your provider who referred you for this exam. Your own provider will talk with you about the results of your scan. You may also read your results on your eCare Results page.

You and your provider will decide the next step, such as treatment for a problem, as needed.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

- UWMC Imaging Services: 206.598.6200
- Harborview Imaging Services: 206.744.3105