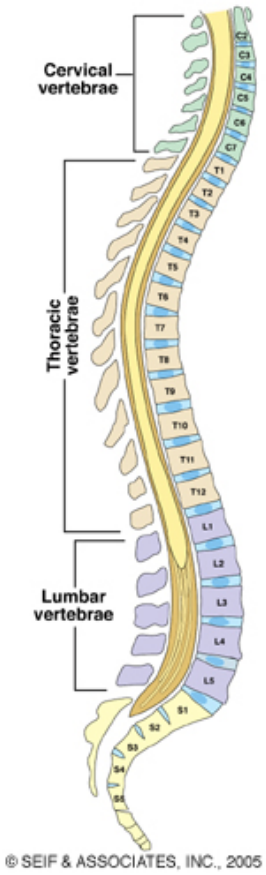
Diagnostic Discogram

A diagnostic discogram is a test to help find the cause of serious back or neck pain. It can tell if the pain is coming from a disc in the spine.



The spine, sometimes called the backbone, is made up of bones called vertebrae. They support the body. They also protect the spinal cord (nerves that carry messages to and from the brain). Between each vertebra is a disc. The discs are oval in shape. Inside is a thick liquid which functions as a spongy cushion. They keep the bones from rubbing against each other when you move. Sometimes there are problems with the discs. For example:

- An injury can cause a disc to tear open and the fluid leaks out. This can irritate the nerves which causes pain.
- Sometimes a spinal disc loses liquid over time. Normal wear and tear can cause this. Then, the vertebrae get too close together which puts pressure on the nerves and pain results.
- A disc can bulge out between the vertebrae. If the disc then presses on a nerve it will cause pain. This is called a herniated disc. An injury or wear and tear can cause it.

The pain from a disc problem might be in your back or in your neck. Pain could also shoot down into an arm or leg. Sometimes there is tingling, weakness or numbness too.

Imaging tests might show disc problems such as an MRI. A diagnostic discogram can pinpoint which disc is really causing the pain.

BEFORE THE PROCEDURE

- A medical evaluation will be done. This will include:
  - A physical examination.
  - Imaging tests of the back. They could include:

1. X-ray.
2. Computed tomography. Called a CT scan, it takes pictures using X-rays and a computer.
3. Magnetic resonance imaging. An MRI scan uses a magnet, radio waves and a computer.

- You will need to stop taking certain medicines.
  - Stop using aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) for pain relief. This includes prescription drugs and over-the-counter drugs. If possible, do this 10-14 days before the procedure. Also stop taking vitamin E.
  - If you take blood-thinners, ask your healthcare provider when you should stop taking them.
- The person having a diagnostic discogram needs to give what is called informed consent. This requires signing a legal paper that gives permission for the procedure. To give informed consent:
  - You must understand how the procedure is done and why.
  - You must be told all the risks and benefits of the procedure.
  - You must sign the consent. A legal guardian also can do this.
  - Signing should be witnessed by a healthcare professional.
- The night before your procedure, do not eat anything after midnight. Sometimes you can have clear fluids at breakfast time. Contact your caregiver for specific instructions.
- Make plans to have someone drive you home after the procedure.
- Arrive at least an hour before the procedure, or whenever your caregiver recommends. This will give you time to check in and fill out any needed paperwork.

LET YOUR CAREGIVERS KNOW ABOUT:

- Any allergies.

- Any allergic reaction to X-ray dye or iodine.
- All medications you are taking, including:
  - Herbs, eyedrops, over-the-counter medications and creams.
  - Blood thinners (*anticoagulants*), aspirin or other drugs (NSAID's) that could affect blood clotting.
- Use of steroids (by mouth or as creams).
- Previous problems with anesthetics (drugs that block pain).
- Possibility of pregnancy, if this applies.
- Any history of blood clots.
- Any history of bleeding or other blood problems.
- Previous surgery.
- Smoking history.
- Any recent symptoms of colds or infections.
- Any history of diabetes or seizures.
- Family history of anesthetic problems.
- Other health problems.

THE PROCEDURE

- The preparation:
  - Small monitors will be put on your body. They are used to check your heart, blood pressure and oxygen level.
  - You will be given an intravenous line (IV). A needle will be inserted in your arm. It is hooked to a plastic tube. Medication will be able to flow directly into your body through the IV.
  - You probably will be given a sedative. This medication will help you relax.
  - You will lie on your side on the examining table.
  - The area of the back that will be tested will be cleaned with a special solution to kill germs on the skin.
- The procedure:
  - You will be given a shot of anesthetic in your back. This is a drug that will make the area numb. It will be given over the discs that will be tested.
  - A long hollow needle will be put through the skin and muscle till it reaches the disc.
  - A special type of X-ray (*fluoroscopy*) will be taken. This checks the position of the needle.
  - A second needle will be put through the hollow needle. It will go into the center of the disc that is being tested.
  - A fluid that shows up on an X-ray (*contrast*) will be injected into the disc.
  - Then, the pressure inside each disc can be measured.
  - Your healthcare provider will ask if you feel pain. You may be asked to compare any pain to the back neck, leg or arm pain you have had.
  - A CT scan will be done. This shows if any contrast fluid is leaking from the disc.
  - The procedure usually takes less than an hour.

AFTER THE PROCEDURE

- You probably will stay in a recovery area for about 30 minutes. Your blood pressure and pulse will be checked.
- Some pain after a diagnostic discogram is normal. You may be given pain medicine while in the recovery area.
- When you are alert and recovered, you will be able to go home. Someone will need to drive you.

RISKS AND COMPLICATIONS

Problems after a diagnostic discogram do not happen often. However, they could include:

- Pain. It sometimes gets worse right after the procedure. This should last only a short time.
- Infection. This can develop in the disc space. That can be very painful. Antibiotics would need to be taken to get rid of the infection.

- Bleeding.
- Injury to a spinal nerve.
- Allergic reaction to the contrast material.
- Seizure.
- Headache.
- Nausea.
- Herniated disc.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Pain may be greater for a day or two after a diagnostic discogram. Muscles might be sore, too.
  - Take whatever pain medication has been prescribed by your healthcare provider. Follow the directions carefully. Do not take over-the-counter painkillers unless the caregiver says it is OK.
  - Putting ice packs on the area every so often may help ease the pain.
- Do not drive if you are taking narcotic pain medications.
- You can start going back to your normal activities after a day or two. But do so gradually. When you can return to work will depend on the type of work you do. You will need to take it easy for a few days.
- Be sure to keep all follow-up appointments.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have any questions about medications.
- Pain continues, even after taking pain medicine.
- You develop a fever of more than 100.5° F (38.1° C).
- You develop more severe increasing arm or leg pain or you have difficulty controlling your bladder or bowel.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Pain suddenly gets much worse.
- You develop a fever of more than 102.0°F (38.9° C).

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