

Vein Palpation

Before attempting a venipuncture, the phlebotomist should assess a vein by palpation. Palpating the vein increases the chance of a successful venipuncture.

The phlebotomist uses palpation to assess the depth, width, direction and health (resilience) of a vein.

Use the index or middle finger to palpate the vein following this procedure:

- Align your finger in the direction of the vein
- Press on top of the vein with enough pressure to depress the skin
- Keep your finger in contact with the skin so that you may feel the "bounce back" of a resilient, healthy vein.

When determining a vein suitable for venipuncture, the skilled phlebotomist relies more on touch or feel than on sight. Looking away from the vein while palpating will help the phlebotomist perfect the skill of palpation leading to good vein assessment.

To palpate a vein, gently and firmly push down on the skin with your index finger, then slowly release the pressure. If you are palpating a vein, you will feel the vein bounce back as you release the pressure. If you are palpating a tendon, it will feel like a rope or thread that is pulled tightly. If you are in doubt, release the tourniquet and palpate the area again. If the "tight rope" is still there, you were palpating a tendon. If you feel a pulse, you were palpating an artery.

Always palpate or feel for the vein, even when the vein is seen. This procedure gives you practice in finding deeper, unseen veins. The vein will feel like an elastic tube that "gives" under the pressure of your finger. Arteries pulsate, so make certain the structure you feel is not pulsating.

If the vein has been used repeatedly for fluid injections and punctures, it may feel cord-like. Such a vein should not be used because it is difficult to obtain blood from it.

If a vein is difficult to find, it may become easier to see after massaging the arm from wrist to elbow, which forces blood into the vein. Or, the area may be tapped sharply with the index and second finger 2 or 3 times, which may cause the vein to dilate. If necessary, a warm damp washcloth can be placed on the skin for a few minutes to make the veins stand out.

HINTS

- ❖ If you are not certain that you have found a vein, examine the other arm. Sometimes veins in one arm are small, while those in the other arm are larger.
- ❖ A patient who has had prior venipunctures may be able to tell you where a vein can best be found.
- ❖ A transilluminator or pocket pen light may be used to help visualize the vein in infants and children.