

FACET JOINT INJECTIONS

What are facet joints and Facet Joint Syndrome?

Bones called vertebrae make up your spine. Each vertebra has facets or flat surfaces that touch where the vertebrae fit together. These form a structure called a *facet joint* on each side of the vertebrae.

Facet Joint Syndrome are symptoms resulting in diffuse pains that do not fit a particular nerve root pattern. These pains often are worse with spine movements, poor posture, and often with sleep. Sometimes the pain is associated with cold or burning sensations and can be made worse by cold, damp weather.

What is a facet joint injection?

Your doctor may have suggested you have a *facet joint injection*. A facet joint injection is performed to help diagnose and/or treat pain that is related to disease or injury of the small joints in the back of the spine. This procedure is done under imaging guidance and is an accurate and definitive way to diagnose facet joint pain syndrome. This is because certain joints can appear abnormal but not cause pain. To the contrary, problematic joints can appear nearly normal and be painful.

How is the procedure performed?

For the procedure, you will be asked to lie nearly flat on your abdomen. Using fluoroscopy to visualize the area under x-ray and under local anesthesia, a small needle is placed into the facet joint or along the facet joint nerves. A small amount of dye may be used to check positioning. Then, a medication comprised of an anti-inflammatory and long-acting anesthetic will be injected. This takes about 15-20 minutes. Multiple levels on either one of both sides may be performed in the same session as needed for your symptoms.

How will I feel during the injection?

You may feel some slight pressure or discomfort. The physician will be interested in how this discomfort compares to your typical pain symptoms prior to the injection.

When will I feel some pain relief?

For up to six (6) hours after the injection, you may feel some numbness and/or relief from your spinal pain. This is due to the long-acting anesthetic that was injected during the procedure. When this wears off, your usual symptoms may return and possibly worsen for a day or two. The benefits of the steroid injection usually require two (2) or three (3) days to begin and possibly can take as long as one week.

What happens if the pain relief lasts only a short while?

If the injection only worked for a short while, your provider may recommend additional injections. Your provider could also consider a procedure that offers more permanent pain relief, called radiofrequency ablation.

The risks of facet joint injections

As with any procedure, there are some inherent risks although these are minimal. Common risks include but are not limited to bruising, bleeding, headaches, irritation or a nerve or nerve injury including paralysis, numbness and weakness. Serious risks are extremely rare but include infection or reactions to the medications which may cause breathing difficulties and cardiac difficulties which may lead to death. An infection could require use of antibiotics and/or surgery.

Resuming Your Activity

Whether your injection was done to relieve and/or diagnose your pain, you can resume your activities as soon as you are able. You may return to work or any other activities. □