

Facet Joint Injections

1. What are facet joints?

The vertebral column (or back bone) is made up of many small bones (vertebra) that are stacked upon one another. This arrangement of the vertebra is what gives the spine its flexibility. The bony areas where each vertebra touches the next vertebra are called the facet joints.

2. Why do facet joints become painful?

There are many nerves in the area of the facet joints. These nerves can become irritated when the facet joints become damaged through injury or the aging process, as in arthritis.

3. How is this type of pain treated?

Facet joint injections are performed to decrease irritation of the nerves in the area of the facet joints. Usually a small quantity of local anesthetic and steroid is injected into the affected joints to reduce the inflammation that injury or arthritis has occurred.

4. How are these injections performed?

The physician will use X-ray guidance to place a needle into the facet joint so that medication can be administered at the exact area causing the pain.

5. How soon will the treatment help?

The onset of relief is usually within 48-72 hours however, it may take as long as a week for the medication to provide you with relief. During the first 24-48 hours after the injection, you may notice a slight increase in pain or you may notice different patterns of pain. This is due to the slight bruising that may occur from the needle, or from the pressure caused by the volume of medication that has been injected. This discomfort will subside as the medication is absorbed.

6. How often can these injections be repeated?

Facet joint injections may be repeated as frequently as two weeks. You may have a total of three facet joint injections in six months or a total of four facet joint injections each year.

7. Are there risks or complications?

As with any procedure, there is the potential for problems. The risks are minimal with facet joint injections. Problems that may occur are:

- ◆ Infection
- ◆ Bleeding
- ◆ Temporary numbness of the arms or legs

There may be an increase in your blood sugar or blood pressure. Some people may occasionally experience an increase in appetite, weight gain or fluid retention. These side effects however, are not common.

8. What are the benefits of facet joint injections?

- ◆ Decrease in pain
- ◆ Return of movement and mobility

9. Are facet joint injections painful?

A local anesthetic (numbing medicine) is injected into the skin before the procedure to minimize discomfort and for many people this is the most uncomfortable part of the procedure. Some people state that they have a sensation of pressure but feel no pain during the injection. This discomfort is minimal for the majority of people.

10. How should I care for myself after the procedure?

You should take it easy on the day of the injection. Bedrest is not needed. Do not vacuum, perform yard work or engage in strenuous activities. Normally you may resume your normal activities the following day. Remember however, that you most likely will not experience pain relief for 2-7 days.

If the injection site is uncomfortable, you may apply ice to the injection site during the first 24 hours after the injection. After 24 hours, you may apply ice or heat if you wish. Whatever you choose to use, apply only 20 minutes at a time (20 minutes on/20 minutes off). Continuous use of ice or heat may damage your skin.

You may continue your pain medications as needed.

You should take your other medications as prescribed and continue your normal diet.

Please notify the physician if you experience:

- ◆ Bleeding from the injection site
- ◆ Dizziness or weakness
- ◆ Signs of infection at the injection site