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Facet Joint Injection

What is a facet joint injection?

A facet joint injection is an injection of an anesthetic with a long lasting steroid ("cortisone") into the facet joints. Facet joints are located in the back and neck at each vertebral level. They are paired (right and left) and are surrounded by a joint capsule, like the finger joints.

This is a common procedure. Because of the low risk and low incidence of any significant problems or side effects, this is felt to be a reasonable procedure to follow when traditional conservative therapy for disc pain has failed to provide improvement. A large percentage of patients upon whom this procedure is performed will get complete resolution of symptoms; a small percentage may experience no real improvement at all.

What is the purpose of it?

The steroid injected reduces the inflammation in the joint space. This can reduce pain and other symptoms caused by inflammation, such as nerve irritation.

How long does the injection take?

The actual injection takes only a few minutes.

What is actually injected?

The injection consists of a mixture of local anesthetic (like novocaine) and the steroid medication.

Will the injection(s) hurt?

The procedure is done under local anesthesia. There will inevitably be some pain with the initial needle stick.

How is the injection performed?

You are placed on your stomach, and the skin on your back or neck is cleaned with antiseptic solution. The injection is performed under fluoroscopic (x-ray) guidance. After the injection, you are placed on your back for ten to fifteen minutes.

What should I do after the procedure?

You should have a ride home. We advise patients to take it easy for the day of the procedure. You may want to apply ice or a heating pad to the affected area. After the first day, you may resume normal activities as tolerated.

Can I go to work to work the next day?

Yes. Unless there are complications, you should be able to return to your work the next day. The most common sensation you may feel is soreness in the neck or back.

What should I expect after the injection?

Immediately after the injection, you may feel that your pain may be gone or quite less. This is due to the local anesthetic injected. This will last for a few hours. Your pain may return and you may have a sore back or neck for a day or two. This discomfort is due to the mechanical process of needle insertion as well as initial irritation from the steroid itself, and may be relieved with gentle stretching (refer to handout received in the office) and/or the application of heat or cold packs. Everyone responds differently, but you should start noticing pain relief within several (up to ten) days.

How long does the effect of the medication last?

The immediate effect is usually from the local anesthetic injected. This wears off in a few hours. The cortisone usually starts working in five to seven days, and its effect can last anywhere from several days to many months.

Will the facet joint injection help me?

It is very difficult to predict if the injection will help you or not. Usually, patients who have recent onset of pain respond better than ones with long-standing or chronic pain. Your physician chose this procedure for you because he/she believes that the potential benefits of an injection outweigh any potential risks.

How many injections do I need to have?

If the first injection does not relieve your symptoms within a week or two, you may be advised to undergo one more injection. If you respond to the injections but still have residual pain, you may be advised to receive a third injection or a different procedure.

If you experience good relief of your pain on the day of the injection, followed by a return of symptoms, you are likely a good candidate to undergo another procedure called radiofrequency lesioning, which involves cauterizing the affected nerve fibers, generally providing longer-lasting relief than cortisone injections (often several months, up to a year or two). *In order to be considered for radiofrequency lesioning, however, you must experience significant pain relief on the same day as your facet joint injection. It is therefore very important that you pay particular attention to your response to the injection within the first few hours, and that you attempt to differentiate between your original pain and any new pain you may be experiencing at the needle insertion site.*

Can I have more than three injections?

In a six-month period, we generally do not perform more than three injections. Giving more than three injections will increase the likelihood of side effects from cortisone. Also, if three injections with fluoroscopic guidance have not helped you much, it is very unlikely that you will get any further benefit from additional injections.

What are the risks and side effects?

This procedure is safe when performed in a controlled setting (surgical center, sterile equipment, and the use of x-ray); however, with any procedure there are risks, side effects, and the possibility of complications. The most common side effect is discomfort, which is temporary. Other risks involve infection, bleeding, or worsening of symptoms. As with other types of injections, you should not have the procedure if you are currently taking blood-thinning medicine (e.g., Coumadin or Plavix). Side effects related to cortisone include fluid retention, weight gain, increased blood sugar (mainly in diabetics), elevated blood pressure, mood swings, irritability, insomnia, and suppression of your body's own natural production of cortisone. Fortunately, serious side effects and complications are uncommon. You should discuss any specific concerns with your physician.