

Facet Block

What is a facet joint block?

Facet joints are small joints in the rear portion of the spine that may cause pain in some patients. The pain is usually centrally located in the back or neck and usually does not radiate much to any part of the body.

A facet block is the process of injecting an anesthetic (numbing) medication into or next to the painful facet joint. The procedure is performed to assess whether your pain is coming from facet joints, and if so, to provide temporary relief from your back pain. The period and degree of pain relief is different for each individual and medication used.

Who should undergo facet joint blocks?

Facet blocks are usually done in anticipation of more definitive treatment of the patient's pain with another procedure called radiofrequency ablation (RFA). Candidates for radiofrequency nerve ablation typically have had two facet joint blocks with different types of anesthetics (numbing medicines).

What can I expect during the procedure?

You will lie on your stomach or side on a fluoroscopy (x-ray) table or CT scanner. The area around the painful site will be cleansed with an antiseptic to decrease the chance of infection. Next, using fluoroscopic (x-ray) or CT guidance, a thin needle will be passed through the skin and placed next to each small nerve sending pain impulses from the facet joint (there are two nerves per joint) or into the joint itself. The position of the needle must be very exact and will be checked by injecting a few drops of contrast (dye). Next, a small amount of local anesthetic will be injected into or next to the joint.

What medication is being injected?

A **local anesthetic** will be injected. This lasts about 1 to 6 hours and provides the physician with diagnostic information regarding whether or not your pain is coming from the treated joint. Your pain will likely return after the local anesthetic wears off.

The procedure will usually be repeated a week or two later with a different local anesthetic to see if your pain responds appropriately.

Does the procedure hurt?

The procedure should be fairly painless, but you may feel some pressure or other mild discomfort during the block.

How long does the procedure take?

Your appointment takes approximately 75 minutes from the time you arrive at the department until the time that the procedure is completed. Immediately after the procedure, the radiologist may want you to stay for up to one hour in the radiology department for observation, but this is infrequent.

What are the risks of the procedure?

Complications that may occur during these procedures include: temporary weakness or numbness if local anesthetic spreads around the nerves coming from the spine. These complications are uncommon.

With thoracic facet injections only, there is a risk of a pneumothorax (the lung is punctured by the needle and partially collapses). This complication is **extremely** rare; inserting a tube in the chest can treat a pneumothorax, if necessary.

On rare occasions, patients will have an adverse reaction to contrast material (dye) used which contains iodine, please inform your doctor and the radiologist if you are allergic to iodine, contrast material (dye) or anesthetic (numbing medicine).

Bleeding and infection are risks of any invasive procedure. Tell your doctor if you take any blood thinners.

What happens after the procedure?

You may need someone to drive you home. The local anesthetic injected near the nerves can result in temporary headache, lightheadedness, dizziness, and nausea.

There may be some local discomfort from needle placement for a day or two.

You will be asked to keep a pain diary for the days after the procedure. This allows the doctor to assess whether or not the facet joints are responsible for your pain and whether or not you may benefit from an RFA procedure.

You should resume the normal activity which usually brings about your pain but should limit your activities to those which you could do prior to the procedure.

What about other medications I am taking?

You should talk to the doctor who prescribed any blood thinning medication before resuming it.

You may continue taking your other pain medications after the procedure, if necessary.

How long does this treatment last?

The pain relief will be short, about a day or two. A series of blocks is necessary before performing the RFA procedure.

Where can I get additional information regarding this procedure?

Ask your doctor or contact **Orthopedic Imaging Center** at **210-617-9100**.

To schedule, please call our offices: 210-617-9000