

Facet Injection

What is an intraarticular facet joint injection?

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 and steroid into 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.

Who should undergo facet joint injections?

Facet injections are usually done for temporary relief of pain coming from the facet joints. If longer term pain relief is desired, a facet **block** should be performed in anticipation of a nerve radiofrequency ablation (RFA) procedure.

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 into the facet joint. A few drops of contrast (dye) will be injected to confirm the needle is in the joint. Next, a small amount of local anesthetic and/or steroid will be injected into the joint.

What medications are being injected?

Two medications are administered to provide both short- and long-term pain relief:

1. A **local anesthetic** (usually bupivacaine) lasts about 6 hours and provides the physician with diagnostic information regarding whether or not you have pain relief immediately following the procedure. After the local anesthetic wears off, your pain may return temporarily.
2. A **steroid** (usually methylprednisone) decreases inflammation that may be irritating the nerves causing your pain. If the steroid is going to help, it will begin 24-48 hours after the injection and its effect may continue for several days, weeks, or months resulting in elimination or reduction of your pain.

Does the procedure hurt?

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

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. In some patients, the steroid used may cause difficulty sleeping and/or facial flushing for a few days.

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

You may resume normal activity as tolerated 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.

If you are diabetic, increases in your blood glucose may occur for several days and you should monitor this closely. Talk to the doctor who treats your diabetes before changing any of your medications.

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

When will I start feeling better?

Relief of your back pain may start shortly after the procedure (effect of the anesthetic), may be delayed for several hours, or may be gradual over the next two weeks (effect of the steroid). In rare cases, the pain may get slightly worse before it gets better.

In some patients, a series of injections are necessary for optimal pain relief.

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