

Facet Joint Injection FAQs

The following Frequently Asked Questions and the answers are for the Facet Joint Injection. It is one of the common procedures performed in this pain clinic. **The following material is given as general information only, and is not to be considered as medical advice or consultation.** The information was prepared by the TPM staff.

What is a Facet Joint Injection?

Facet Joint Injection is an injection of long lasting steroid ("cortisone") in the Facet joints – which are located in the back area, as a part of the bony structure.

What is the purpose of it?

The steroid injected reduces the inflammation and/or swelling of tissue in the joint space. This may in turn reduce pain, and other symptoms caused by inflammation / irritation of the joint and surrounding structures.

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 lidocaine or bupivacaine) and the steroid medication (triamcinolone – Aristocort[®] or methylprednisolone – Depo-medrol[®]).

Will the injection hurt?

The procedure involves inserting a needle through skin and deeper tissues (like a "tetanus shot"). So, there is some discomfort involved. However, we numb the skin and deeper tissues with a local anesthetic using a very thin needle prior to inserting the needle into the joint. Most of the patients also receive intravenous sedation and analgesia, which makes the procedure easy to tolerate.

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Will I be “put out” for this procedure?

No. This procedure is done under local anesthesia. Most of the patients also receive intravenous sedation and analgesia, which makes the procedure easy to tolerate. The amount of sedation given generally depends upon the patient tolerance.

How is the injection performed?

It is done either with the patient lying on the stomach, or for the cervical (neck area) injections – in sitting position, under x-ray control. The patients are monitored with EKG, blood pressure cuff and blood oxygen-monitoring device. The skin in the back is cleaned with antiseptic solution and then the injection is carried out. After the injection, you are placed on your back or on your side.

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 only for a few hours. Your pain will return and you may have a “sore back” for a day or two. This is due to the mechanical process of needle insertion as well as initial irritation from the steroid itself. You should start noticing pain relief starting the 5th day or so.

What should I do after the procedure?

You should have a ride home. We advise the patients to take it easy for a day or so after the procedure. You may want to apply ice to the affected area. Perform the activities as tolerated by you.

Can I go to work to work the next day?

Unless there are complications, you should be able to return to your work the next day. The most common thing you may feel is sore back.

How long the effect of the medication lasts?

The immediate effect is usually from the local anesthetic injected. This wears off in a few hours. The cortisone starts working in about 5 to 7 days and its effect can last for several days to a few months.

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How many injections do I need to have?

If the first injection does not relieve your symptoms in about a week to two weeks, you may be recommended to have one more injection. If you respond to the injections and still have residual pain, you may be recommended for a third injection

Can I have more than three injections?

In a six-month period, we generally do not perform more than three injections. This is because the medication injected lasts for about six months. If three injections have not helped you much, it is very unlikely that you will get any further benefit from more injections. Also, giving more injections will increase the likelihood of side effects from cortisone.

Will the Facet Joint Injection help me?

It is very difficult to predict if the injection will indeed help you or not. Generally speaking, the patients who have recent onset of pain may respond much better than the ones with long standing pain.

What are the risks and side effects?

Generally speaking, this procedure is safe. However, with any procedure there are risks, side effects, and possibility of complications. The most common side effect is pain – which is temporary. The other risks involve, infection, bleeding, worsening of symptoms, spinal block, epidural block etc. The other risks are related to the side effects of cortisone: These include weight gain, increase in blood sugar (mainly in diabetics), water retention, suppression of body's own natural production of cortisone etc. Fortunately, the serious side effects and complications are uncommon.

Who should not have this injection?

If you are allergic to any of the medications to be injected, if you are on a blood thinning medication (e.g. Coumadin®), or if you have an active infection going on, you should not have the injection.