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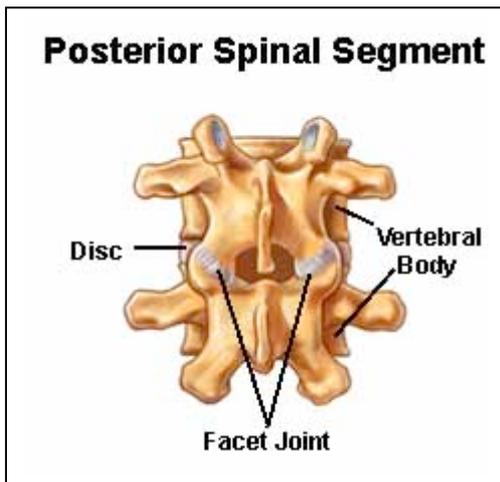
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Facet Joint Injections for Spinal Pain Information for Patients

Facet joints are the small joints located in pairs at each segment at the back of the spine. They provide stability and guide movement of the back. The joints consist of the two surfaces of adjacent vertebrae and are separated by a thin layer of cartilage. Each joint is surrounded by a sac-like capsule filled with a lubricating liquid that reduces the friction between the two bone surfaces when the spine moves.



As with any other joint, a facet joint can become painful as a result of inflammation, trauma or abnormal stress.

The most common symptoms of facet joint pain include:

- Pain or tenderness on one or both sides of the back or neck
- Pain on twisting
- Lower back pain with radiation of pain to the buttocks or back of thighs
- Neck pain with radiation of pain to the shoulders and upper arms

A number of research studies have evaluated the effectiveness of facet joint injections as a diagnostic and therapeutic tool for spinal pain. Research largely indicates that facet joint injections can give relief from the symptoms of spinal pain for more than 6 months in up to 45% of patients.

It is also recommended that facet joint injections are used to allow the patient to take up other forms of conservative treatment such as physiotherapy, pilates or yoga, rather than as a stand-alone treatment.

Facet Joint Injections

In a facet joint injection, a long-acting steroid medication is injected, in combination with local anaesthetic, to block the pain coming from the joint. Facet joint injections are administered for two reasons:

Diagnostic

The first reason for a facet joint injection is to ascertain whether or not the joint is truly the source of the back pain. The local anaesthetic part of the injection will numb the joint. If the patient experiences immediate pain relief, this confirms that the joint in question is the pain source.

Therapeutic

The second reason for a facet joint injection is that it is thought the long-acting steroid part of the medication may provide longer relief of the symptoms by reducing inflammation in the joint.

Another major reason for injecting the facet joints is to provide temporary pain relief so that a physiotherapist may be able to treat the symptoms effectively.

Facet joint injections are normally administered in the following manner:

- The patient lies on his/her stomach on an x-ray couch. Fluoroscopic x-rays are carried out throughout the procedure to ascertain correct positioning of the needles.

- The area to be injected is cleansed with a sterile swab.
- Under local anaesthetic, a needle is gently positioned into the facet joint; this may be a little uncomfortable.
- A mixture of anaesthetic and anti-inflammatory or steroid medication is then injected into the facet joint(s).
- The needle is then withdrawn.

The risks associated with facet joint injections are mainly related to possible anaphylactic or allergic reaction to either the local anaesthetic or the steroid. However, this is rare. There is only minimal risk of infection or neurological deterioration.

Following the injections, the patient is able to leave hospital immediately and should have arranged for a driver to take them home. Care should be taken to avoid any highly stressful activities to either the neck or the back for 24 hours following the injection. If a first set of injections is effective in relieving symptoms, the injections may be repeated up to twice more.