

Pacific Coast Spine Institute and Pain Center

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Facet Joint Injection (Cervical, Thoracic and Lumbar)

A facet joint injection is a procedure that identifies the source of irritation in the small joints at each segment of the spine. These joints provide stability and help guide motion. A cervical (neck), thoracic (upper back) or lumbar (lower back) facet joint injection involves injecting a steroid (anti-inflammatory) medication, which can anesthetize (numb) the facet joints and block the pain.

If multiple levels of pain exist within the facets, several injections may be required to pinpoint the pain source in each location. This pain relief will enable you to undergo necessary conventional treatment, such as physical therapy, to rehabilitate your back.

Procedure preparation

- If you are taking any anticoagulants or blood thinners such as Coumadin or aspirin, you must discontinue taking them 5 days prior to the scheduled procedure.
- Contact your prescribing doctor before you stop taking any medication.
- If you feel you need mild sedation, please discuss this with your physician. If you opt for any kind of sedation, you will need a driver for your appointment.
- Notify your physician about any allergies you have prior to your procedure.

During the procedure – what to expect

- Using a thin needle and x-ray-guidance (fluoroscopy), the physician will inject a local anesthesia, or numbing medicine to the injection site.
- During the procedure you may feel some slight pressure or discomfort.
- The physician will be interested in how this discomfort compares to your usual pain symptoms.
- X-rays are taken, and a combination of an anti-inflammatory (steroid) and anesthetic medications are then injected for pain relief.
- You will remain awake during the 10-20 minute procedure, and may experience some slight pressure or discomfort during the injection.
- Please inform the physician how it differs from your usual symptoms.
- You will be asked to wait 15-20 minutes after your procedure before leaving.

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After the procedure – what to expect

- You may experience numbness and/or relief from your symptoms for up to six hours after the injection.
- Your usual symptoms may then return and may possibly be worse than usual for a day or two.
- The beneficial effects of the steroids usually require 2-3 days to take hold, but may take as long as 5-7 days. If there is no change in your symptoms after a week, your doctor may want to investigate other possible sources for your pain.
- If an initial injection provided a certain amount of relief, a second injection might strengthen the pain relief effect. Also, if your pain subsides, but begins to return weeks or months later, additional injections – up to four a year – are possible.
- Keep track of how long relief lasts and report it to your physician. If there is no change in the pain, then investigation can be focused on other possible sources of your pain. In either case, the information is useful to the doctor who referred you for this procedure.
- If the injection blocked your pain effectively, but only for a short time, your doctor may request additional injections. Your doctor may also wish to consider a procedure that offers more permanent relief, such as radiofrequency rhizotomy.

Possible side effects

- Steroid medications may cause facial flushing, occasional low-grade fevers, hiccups, insomnia, headaches, water retention, increased appetite, increased heart rate, and abdominal cramping or bloating.

These side effects are bothersome in only about 5% of patients and commonly disappear within 1-3 days after the injection.

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