

Spinal Facet Joint Injections

The spine's amazing strength and flexibility is due in large part to the unique interaction between the disc in the front part of the spinal column and the facet joints in the back part of the spinal column. Facet joints are small, paired spinal joints that allow the spine to bend, twist and turn. Spinal facet joints are synovial joints and, like the shoulder and the knee, contain a rich network of pain-sensing nerve fibers. These small, delicate joints are prone to injury, degeneration and inflammation, and may cause chronic neck and back pain independent of intervertebral discs and spinal nerve roots.

Origins of Facet Joint Pain

Facet joints are especially vulnerable when a patient has intervertebral disc degeneration. As the disc degenerates, its volume reduces and the disc space flattens out. As the disc space between the vertebral bodies narrows, the facet joints lose their support and experience increased stress. If the facet joints deteriorate under stress or are subjected to injury forces, they may cause chronic pain in the spinal area rather than in the arm or leg.

Interventional Treatments

Just as epidural injections are used to treat disc and nerve root pain within the spinal column, facet joint injections are sometimes used to diagnose and treat facet joint pain.

If pain reoccurs after a joint injection, a technique called radiofrequency medial branch ablation (RFA) can identify and destroy the joint's small sensory nerve (medial branch nerve) to obtain long-term pain relief. With RFA, a physician first uses local anesthetic to block the medial branch nerve in order to confirm that the joint is the true source of the pain. If the nerve block reduces pain for the duration of the local anesthetic, then the nerve can be destroyed with a radiofrequency heat current, rendering the joint painless and reducing pain long term.



Rapid deceleration can damage cervical facet joints, which are sometimes the source of whiplash-induced chronic pain.

Injecting steroids directly into the facet joints may reduce pain and facilitate physical therapy.



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