

What are facet joint injections?

Back pain can have many potential causes. One of these is pain arising from the small joints between the adjacent bones (vertebrae) of the spinal column called facet joints (or zygapophyseal joints). Facet joints allow the vertebral bones to move relative to each other.

Your doctor may suggest an injection of these joints as a way of trying to help identify the cause of your pain, or to treat it, or both.

Injections may involve local anaesthetic or a steroid medication, or both. A local anaesthetic numbs the joints temporarily and a steroid injection is believed to have a more prolonged effect on reducing pain.

What does it involve and will it hurt?

The injection is usually done as a hospital outpatient appointment lasting approximately an hour to an hour and a half.

Do not have anything to eat or drink for 4 hours before your appointment. During the injection you will be lying on your stomach or slightly on one side. The skin around the injection site will be sterilised with iodine or a similar solution. Local anaesthetic will then be injected into the skin to numb the surface.

As the facet joints are deep in the back and not easily seen, the facet joint injection will be given with help from an X-ray machine. It can be a little uncomfortable in your back at the time of the injection, and may even cause a temporary increase in your pain for a day or two afterwards.

If you are finding the injection unpleasant you may be given some sedation through a small cannula put into your arm.

What are the potential complications?

There are some potential complications or problems associated with the injection. The needle may occasionally enter a blood vessel or brush up against a nerve around the area of the facet joint. However the needle used is very slender and is unlikely to cause any permanent damage.

There is no guarantee that the local anaesthetic or steroid medication injected into the facet joints will relieve your pain. If your pain comes from the facet joints there is an extremely good chance of pain relief. The pain relief is rarely permanent and the benefit tends to wear off over time. This may be as quickly as a within a few days, or sometimes it will last as long as 6-12 months.

The injections can be repeated if necessary. However, there is a belief amongst some doctors that wear and tear of these small facet joints may be accelerated when steroids are injected. For this reason it is unlikely that you would be offered facet joint injections any more frequently than every 6 months.

It is also possible for you to be allergic to the medications given. This would be very rare.

Are there any special instructions?

Once the injection is completed you will stay with us for about ½ an hour and then be allowed home. You should be accompanied home by a responsible adult and you may eat or drink normally afterwards.

There is no restriction on movement and you do not need to spend any further amount of time lying down. You should not undertake excessive increase

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in movement above your normal pattern as this may temporarily aggravate your symptoms once the local anaesthetic wears off.

What should I do if I feel unwell afterwards?

If you feel unwell after the Injection:

During office hours

Monday – Friday (8am -4.30pm). Please contact the Pain Management Service.

Out of hours, weekends and Public Holidays Please contact your doctor(GP) or the after hours surgery.

If you have any questions about the Injection or the information you have just read, the nursing staff or your doctor who will be more than happy to answer them.

Contact us

Pain Management Service

Ward Support Block

Level 10

Wellington Hospital

Telephone: (04) 385 5344

Fax: (04) 385 5509

Hours: 8am-4.30pm, Monday to Friday

After hour's medical centres:

Kenepuru Hospital Accident & medical

Open 24hrs a day everyday (04) 918 2300

Paraparaumu -Team Medical Coastlands Shoppingtown

Open 8am -10pm everyday. (04) 298 2228

Waikanae

Mon-Thurs 7pm-8am, Fri 5pm-8am, and at anytime during weekends or Public Holidays (04) 293 6002

Accident & Urgent medical centre Wellington

Open 8am-11pm every day. No appointment necessary. (04) 384 4944

Healthline

If you are unsure if you need to visit your GP or After hours medical centre you may wish to call Healthline for free advice. Call free anytime on 0800 611 116.