

# CERVICAL FACET JOINT PAIN

## WHAT ARE THE FACET JOINTS?

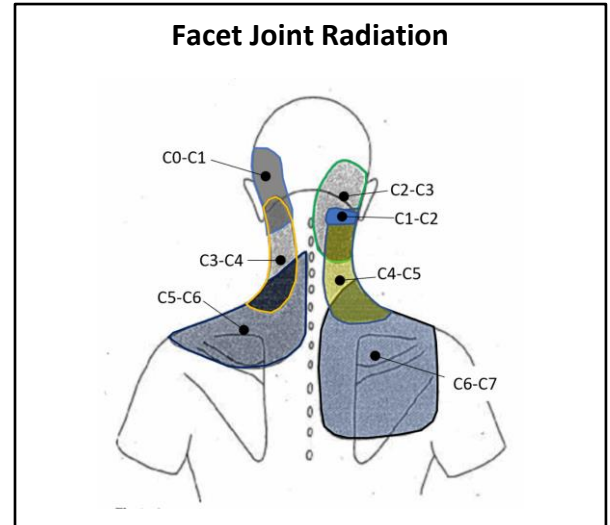
Small joints that run the entire length of the spine that allow the spine to move, similar to other joints in the body, these can degenerate based on poor posture and stress upon the cartilage within the joints. Once the cartilage degenerates, a “Bone on Bone” type of picture occurs.

## HOW DOES FACET JOINT PAIN PRESENT?

It often presents with complaints of neck pain, headaches, and limited range of motion (ROM). The pain is described as a dull, aching discomfort in the posterior neck that sometimes radiates to the shoulder or mid back regions (see image). Often it feels as if there is a tight muscle in between the shoulder blades. Pain is usually worse following neck spine extension or rotary motions, such as turning the head to drive.

## HOW IS FACET JOINT PAIN DIAGNOSED?

Many other conditions can present similar such as a pinched nerve, discogenic pain, muscle strain, fibromyalgia, etc. History, exam, and imaging are helpful but not conclusive. More than one third of all adults over the age of 20 and 100% of adult over the age of 60 have degenerative changes of the facet joints on imaging, even though many of these people have no pain at all<sup>1</sup>. This is why a diagnostic medial branch nerve block is required to **temporarily** stop the pain signals from the joint and imaging alone is not appropriate.



## WHAT IS A MEDIAL BRANCH BLOCK?

A diagnostic block to temporarily stop incoming pain signals from the facet joint.

Think of this nerve block similar to a lab test, Xray, or biopsy. It is a diagnostic tool & **not a treatment** procedure and pain should return within 24-48 hours. If the facet joints are not the main issue causing your pain, then you may not have any or have minimal pain relief within the 24-48 hour period. Treatment procedures are done if you respond well to the diagnostic block.

## HOW DO I INTERPRET THE OUTCOME OF THE PROCEDURE?

- 1) **PAIN DOES NOT IMPROVE FOR A FEW HOURS AFTER THE PROCEDURE:**
  - a. This means that the pain is probably not coming from the facet joints. This will help your provider workup other areas that can present in a similar manner as facet joint pain.
- 2) **PAIN DOES IMPROVE FOR A FEW HOURS & THEN RETURNS:**
  - a. This would mean that the pain is probably coming from the joints
- 3) **PAIN IMPROVES FOR A FEW HOURS & RETURNS WITHIN 24 HOURS, BUT IMPROVES AGAIN AFTER SEVERAL DAYS:**
  - a. This means that the medications had an unusual long-lasting effect on the pain

## WHAT SHOULD I DO AFTER MY PROCEDURE

- Most important is to see if activities that were painful before the procedure are less painful and if your function is improved as it is a DIAGNOSTIC block
- Do not drive for the remainder of the day, on the day the procedure is performed.
- Avoid using heat on the injected areas, taking a tub bath or soaking in water (i.e. pool, jacuzzi, etc.) for the rest of the day

## REFERENCES

1. Perolat, R., Kastler, A., Nicot, B. et al. Facet joint syndrome: from diagnosis to interventional management. Insights Imaging 9, 773–789 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13244-018-0638-x>