

CERVICAL FACET SYNDROME/ARTHROPATHY

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.

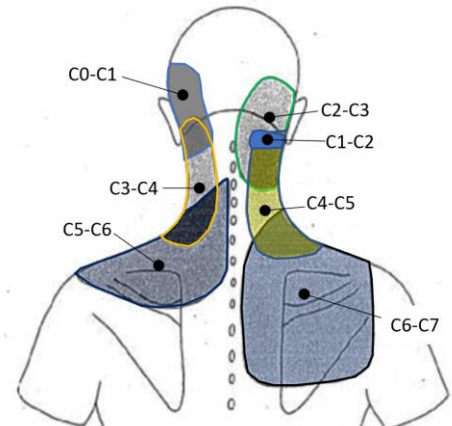
HOW DOES CERVICAL FACET JOINT PAIN PRESENT?

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, where a clicking or grinding can be heard.

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. 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.

Facet Joint Radiation



WHAT IS A MEDIAL BRANCH BLOCK?

- A diagnostic/test block with numbing medication 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:

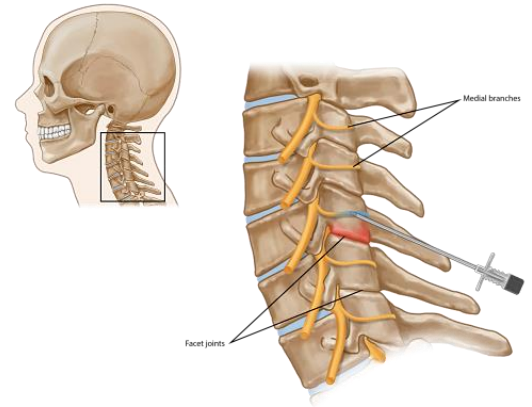
- a. This would mean that the pain is probably coming from the facet joints and an ablation would be appropriate

WHAT SHOULD I DO AFTER MY PROCEDURE

- You will not be able to drive, but we want you to test out the block by doing tasks that typically are painful
- Avoid heat on the injected areas, taking a tub bath or soaking in water (i.e. pool, jacuzzi, etc.) for 48 hours
- 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. You will call our clinic at (775) 870-1480 to provide the results
 - If your diagnostic/test block is successful, then you may be a candidate for a **radiofrequency ablation (RFA)**

WHAT IS A RADIOFREQUENCY ABLATION (RFA)

A lumbar RFA is a procedure that uses radio waves to stop the cervical medial branch nerve from transmitting pain signals from the injured facet joint to the brain. The procedure calls for a needle to be inserted through the skin and guided with X-ray to the correct site overlying the medial branch nerve. The sound waves heat the nerve causing damage but not permanently destroying the nerve. Pain relief ranges between 50% and 95% of baseline pain levels and these effects last anywhere between 6 and 15 months.



WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF RFA

- No relief from any procedure or surgery is always a risk. Studies demonstrate a small subset of patients who respond very well to the diagnostic medial branch blocks do not respond to the subsequent ablation
- Post procedure pain that may last for a week or two after the procedure
- The risk of complications from RFA is very low. On occasion, permanent nerve damage or pain can occur
- In some people, the original pain may get may not improve or even become worse
- Other uncommon complications, include the standard risks of a needle entering the skin, which include infection and bleeding at the needle insertion site
- Temporary dizziness can also be experienced for up to 24 hours

BEFORE THE PROCEDURE

- Our office staff will call you a few days before the procedure for a pre-procedure screening.
- Let us know if you have bleeding disorders, or if you are using blood thinners like aspirin, Coumadin® (warfarin), Plavix® (clopidogrel), Ticlid® (ticlopidine), heparin, Lovenox® (enoxaparin), Fragmin® (dalteparin), Aggrenox® (dipyridamole), or NSAIDS (such as ibuprofen, naproxen, nabumetone, diclofenac, etodolac, indomethacin, ketorolac, meloxicam, piroxicam, ketoprofen, oxaprozin), or especially any herbal blood-thinning medications.
- If you are placed on antibiotics for any reason, please alert our office. The procedure will need to be rescheduled to reduce the risk of an infection
- Your doctor may call in a medication to help you relax during the procedure, if this is something you would be interested please alert our office staff 2 days before the procedure so we may send the medication into your pharmacy

THE DAY OF THE PROCEDURE

- You will be required to have a driver as the numbing medication used can spread and cause temporary muscle weakness of the arm for a few hours
- The procedure should take about 30 minutes to perform
- You will receive post procedure instructions the day of the procedure and a follow up with your provider 2 weeks after the procedure will be scheduled

WHAT TO EXPECT AFTER THE PROCEDURE

- Is immediate pain relief expected?
 - **No**, the physiology of heating the nerve does not cause immediate effects
- The neck pain and/or headaches may be improved for 4-6 hours while the local anesthesia (numbing medication) is working (similar to the medial branch blocks). There typically is an increase in pain after this wears off. Ice packs used for 20-30 minutes every 1-2 hours is very helpful for this post procedure soreness.
- Since it takes up to 14 days for the nerve to be affected by the ablation, pain relief can take up to 14 days
- Many times other areas are also sending pain signals that may not have been severe before the ablation but now that the facet joint pain signals are reduced, you may feel a pain from a different source. This may feel like the ablation was not effective. This is one of the reasons why a 14 day post procedure follow up is needed.