

Facet Syndrome

A Common Cause of Neck and Back Pain

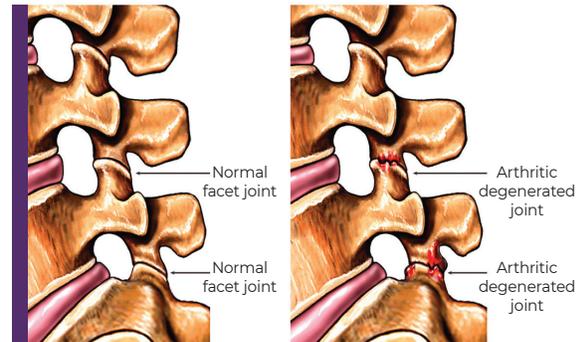
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Condition Sheet



If you are experiencing persistent, chronic pain in any part of your spine — from your neck to your lower back — you may be suffering from facet syndrome, one of the most common causes of back pain. When seen in adults over age 50, facet syndrome, which is usually caused by normal wear and tear, results in arthritis. However, it can also occur at a much younger age from injury or overuse. Although millions of Americans suffer from this condition, there is an alternative to living with this pain. Through accurate diagnosis and proven treatment methods, our affiliated physicians can help relieve your pain without surgery, enabling you to return to a healthy, active lifestyle.



Understanding facet syndrome

Facet syndrome can occur anywhere in the spine. It develops in the small joints located between each vertebra called facet joints. These joints are in constant motion, providing the spine with both the stability and flexibility needed to walk, run, bend, sit, and twist. The joint surfaces are lined with cartilage, allowing them to glide easily over each other. As we age, the cartilage gradually wears away, and in many cases, growths called “bone spurs” can develop. Friction between the bones leads to the tenderness, swelling, stiffness, and pain of arthritis. Though generally the result of the natural aging process, the initial cause of arthritis, or facet syndrome, may be an injury or overuse in youth.

Why facet syndrome develops

When a joint is damaged through normal deterioration, injury,

or repetitive trauma, it may become swollen, painful, and stiff. Inflammation is usually temporary, but in arthritic joints, it may cause long-lasting or permanent disability. In addition to age, other risk factors for facet syndrome include:

- Excessive body weight
- Overuse due to sports or heavy labor
- Family history of facet syndrome
- The presence of other diseases such as gout, other types of arthritis, or infections

Damage can also stem from injuries, including whiplash; sleeping with a twisted neck; a sudden jerk of the neck; twisting while lifting overhead; or trauma to the spine.

The symptoms of facet syndrome

At first, you may simply experience an aching feeling in your neck or back that fades and returns again

after overuse. Eventually, as the disease progresses, the pain occurs more frequently and lasts longer. One joint may be affected initially, but with time and continued activity, more joints may deteriorate. Generally, there is a persistent tenderness over the irritated joint, some loss of flexibility, and pain that is aggravated by stretching or turning. Other symptoms vary depending on the location of the affected joint and may include:

- Pain that is often worse in the beginning and end of the day or with a change in weather
- Lower back pain that radiates into the buttocks, pelvic area, or thighs
- Neck pain that radiates into the shoulders, arms, or head
- Headaches at the base of the skull, aching behind the eyes, and/or ringing in the ears
- Loss of flexibility, difficulty bending or walking

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- The sound of bone rubbing on bone when you move
- Abnormal curvature in the spine
- Weakness or numbness in your legs or arms

Standing has some effect on facet joint pain, but sitting or riding in the car for long periods of time can significantly exacerbate the condition.

The importance of accurate diagnosis

Back and neck pain are caused by several different types of disorders, many of which share similar symptoms. Accurately determining the correct source of your pain is critical to successful treatment.

At our network of pain management centers, diagnosis begins with a thorough clinical examination, including a complete medical history, analysis of your symptoms, and physical exam. Testing may include x-rays, CT scan, MRI, blood

tests, and a specific technique called facet joint injection*. Both therapeutic and diagnostic, this procedure enables physicians to precisely identify the exact origin of pain. Using x-ray guidance called fluoroscopy, the physician is able to see and accurately target the affected joints with anti-inflammatory medication. Performed under local anesthetic, facet joint injections offer the advantage of providing immediate feedback in confirming the source of your pain.

Effective pain relief without surgery

The painful symptoms of arthritis in the spine can often be lessened or temporarily relieved with simple measures such as oral anti-inflammatory and pain medications, heat treatments, modified activity, weight reduction, improving posture, physical therapy, exercise, and traction. For

longer lasting relief, our affiliated physicians recommend two advanced non-surgical therapies.

Facet joint injections are not only used to make a precise diagnosis, but are also an effective therapy for providing substantial pain relief. Radiofrequency denervation (RF)* is an alternative method of treatment that may also be explored with your physician. In this procedure, nerve endings associated with the facet joints are deadened using thermal energy, which provides durable pain relief.

Proven to be safe and effective, these therapeutic procedures offer the benefit of alleviating your pain without surgery, without general anesthesia, and without hospital stays or long recovery periods.

**For more details, ask for an information sheet specific to this condition or procedure.*

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