

What are the risks?

Having facet joint injections is generally safe. However, all medical procedures carry an element of risk. This can be divided into the risk of side-effects and the risk of complications.

Side-effects

These are the unwanted, but usually mild and temporary effects of a successful procedure. After a facet joint injection you may feel more pain and tenderness in the area during the first 24 hours as the anaesthesia wears off. Sometimes this lasts for a few days. You will be given painkillers to help with this.

Complications

This is when problems occur during or after the procedure. Most people are not affected. Complications of facet joint injections are rare but can be serious.

A possible complication of any injection into the spine is that the treatment reaches unintended parts of the spinal

cord. This can cause a drop in your blood pressure or widespread numbness. Your consultant monitors you constantly and will be able to notice this quickly, and provide appropriate care.

There is a risk of infection in the joints. Other possible complications include inflammation of the nerves in your spine, and damage to nerves or tendons near the joints being injected. If you have repeated facet joint injections you may be at risk of damage to the soft tissue or cartilage in your joints.

The chance of complications depends on the exact type of operation you are having and other factors such as your general health. Ask your consultant to explain how these risks apply to you.

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Patient information

Having facet joint injections

This leaflet provides some information about having facet joint injections. The treatment described here may be adapted to meet your individual medical needs, so it's important to follow your consultant's advice.

Please raise any concerns or questions with your consultant or nurse. It is natural to feel anxious before hospital treatment but knowing what to expect can help.

About facet joint injections

The facet joints link together the bones in your back. They help to stabilise the spine and control the degree of movement. With age, they are prone to injury and deterioration and are a common cause of lower back pain, especially the type that is worse while sitting and improved by walking.

An injection into a facet joint is given to treat the pain, inflammation and any restriction of movement caused by the deterioration. A steroid medicine (which reduces inflammation) or a combination of a steroid and a local anaesthetic is injected into the joint.

It can take up to a week for the full benefits of a steroid injection to be felt. The effects of a successful injection can last anything from a few weeks to several months. The benefits last longer than six months only in a minority of people. Repeat injections (usually up to a maximum of three) are possible.

Many people find that their back pain and mobility does not improve.

Facet joint injections are usually performed as an outpatient or day-case procedure with sedation. Sedative drugs relieve anxiety and cause temporary relaxation without putting you to sleep.

Less frequently, some people have the injections done under general anaesthesia, which means that they are asleep during the procedure. This leaflet describes facet joint injections with sedation.

For more information about sedation and anaesthesia, please see the separate Spire Healthcare patient information leaflets *Having a general anaesthetic* and *Having a local anaesthetic or sedation*. Your consultant will advise you which method is most suitable for you.

If a facet joint injection is successful, this will help your consultant decide whether you would benefit from further treatment.

Your consultant will explain the potential benefits and risks of having facet joint injections, and will also discuss the alternatives to the procedure.

Preparing for the procedure

The hospital will usually send you a pre-admission questionnaire. Your answers help hospital staff to plan your care by taking into account your medical history and any previous experience of hospital treatment. You will usually be asked to fill in this questionnaire and return it within three days.

If you are treated as an out-patient, you may not be sent a pre-admission questionnaire. Instead, you will be asked to answer the questions when you come for treatment.

If you normally take medication (eg tablets for blood pressure), continue to take this as usual, unless your consultant specifically

tells you not to. If you are unsure about taking your medication, please contact the hospital.

Before you come into hospital, you will be asked to follow some instructions.

- Have a bath or shower at home on the day of your admission.
- Remove any make-up, nail varnish and jewellery. Rings and earrings that you'd prefer not to remove can usually be covered with sticky tape.
- Follow the fasting instructions in your admission confirmation letter. Typically, you must not eat or drink for about six hours before a general anaesthetic or sedation. However, some anaesthetists allow occasional sips of water until two hours beforehand.

When you arrive at the hospital, a nurse will explain how you will be cared for during your stay and will do some simple tests such as checking your heart rate and blood pressure, and testing your urine. Your consultant will usually visit you before the procedure. This is a good time to ask any unanswered questions.

Consent

If you are happy to proceed with the treatment, you will be asked to sign a consent form. This confirms that you have given permission for the procedure to go ahead.

You need to know about the possible side-effects and complications of this procedure in order to give your consent. Please see the back of this leaflet for more information about these.

About the procedure

In a private room or cubicle, you will be asked to change into a hospital gown which opens at the back.

Facet joint injections are usually performed in an operating theatre, anaesthetic room or X-ray department.

Before the procedure begins, you will have a small plastic tube (cannula) placed in a vein in the back of your hand. This can be used to give you sedatives, or other medicines if necessary, during your treatment.

If sedative drugs are given, you will feel relaxed and drowsy almost immediately. The procedure will not start until the sedatives have taken effect. You will be able to follow instructions given by your consultant, but may remember very little about the procedure afterwards.

Facet joint injections are usually done with you lying on your tummy. A thin needle is passed through the skin on your back into the facet joint. The steroid and anaesthetic mixture is injected into the joint. The treatment usually only takes a few minutes and more than one joint can be injected during the same session.

During a facet joint injection, your consultant will take X-ray pictures to ensure the needle is correctly placed in the facet joint.

Facet joint injections can be uncomfortable because they are given in an area that may already be painful.

After the procedure

If you have had general anaesthesia or sedation, you'll be taken from the

operating theatre to the recovery room, where your blood pressure and heart rate will be monitored.

After this you will be taken back to your room or the day-care ward where you'll need to rest on a bed for around two hours. The nursing staff will be on hand to make sure you are comfortable. If you have had a sedative, you may doze off during

this time. Painkillers will be available to relieve any discomfort.

When you feel ready, you can begin to drink and eat, starting with clear fluids.

Going home

Before you leave, a nurse will give you a contact telephone number for the hospital and a date for a follow-up appointment with your consultant. This is usually about eight to ten weeks later.

The effects of any sedative or general anaesthetic may last longer than you expect, so you should not drive, drink alcohol, operate machinery or sign legal documents for 48 hours. This means that you will have to arrange for someone to take you home. You should try to arrange for somebody to stay with you for the first 24 hours.

After facet joint injections, you should rest your back for 48 hours to allow the steroid to take effect. This means that you should take it easy, but you shouldn't stay in bed. Gently moving the joints through the normal range of movements is good for you, but avoid strenuous exercise. After the first couple of days you should move your back as usual.

You must follow your consultant's advice about returning to work. Expect to take one or two days off, or longer if you do manual work or are on your feet all day.

During the first few days, if you feel unwell or develop any of the following, please contact the hospital immediately:

- pain that does not settle or gets worse
- a fever or high temperature