



**Pain Management Unit  
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**East Suffolk and  
North Essex  
NHS Foundation Trust**

# Facet Joint Injection for Lower Back Pain

This leaflet aims to give you information about your injection, your stay in the hospital and advice for when you go home.

## What are lumbar facet joints?

Facet joints are pairs of joints on the back of each vertebra (the bones that make up the spine). The spine bends at these joints in the lumbar region (mid to lower back). They take most of the strain when you bend your spine backwards.

When the discs – which are sandwiched between each vertebra – are worn the facet joints are stressed even more.

## What is a facet joint injection?

This is the name given to an injection into the small joints of the spine, the facet joints. This type of treatment is widely used for the treatment of chronic back pain due to facet joint disease. It is used to help reduce the level of your pain.

## What does the treatment involve?

A facet joint injection is performed as a day case procedure, in an operating theatre under X-ray control. X-rays are used to accurately locate the joints. The injection is either made up of a local anaesthetic and steroid (steroids help to reduce inflammation in joints) or only local anaesthetic and can serve as therapeutic or diagnostic injection.

**If you are having sedation you must not eat or drink anything for six hours before the procedure.** Please bring a list of all your medications with you. It is important that you inform your doctor if you are allergic

to any medication or are on blood thinning medication, such as warfarin, clopidogrel, ticlopidine etc.

Please also inform us if you have an infection near the injection site, if you have had a recent steroid injection, if you think you might be pregnant, if you have diabetes or if you are feeling unwell on the day.

For the procedure, you will come to the Day Surgery Unit and be admitted by a nurse who will measure your blood pressure and pulse. You may also be seen by your consultant and have the site of the injection marked. Shortly before the procedure you will need to change into a hospital gown and will be taken to theatres on a trolley. You will have necessary hospital checks and if you are female and aged between 12 and 60 years, a pregnancy status check may be done.

In theatre, a cannula may be inserted for the administration of sedative medication. You will need to lie face down on the operating table to help expose your back. Staff can help you to get into this position. You will be lying on your front for about 30 minutes. We will monitor your heart rate and blood pressure, and may give you a light sedative.

Your back will be cleaned twice with antiseptic solution. This will feel quite cold as it evaporates very quickly and will temporarily leave a pink stain where it is applied. Drapes will be applied to keep the area clean and X-rays will be taken to identify the facet joints. Local anaesthetic may be injected to numb your skin.



This will cause some pain and a stinging sensation briefly before local anaesthetic takes effect.

Multiple joints may be injected in the same session. We can give a maximum of six injections during the procedure. At the time of injection you might feel some pain or pressure in your back.

Following the procedure, a small dressing or plastic spray will be applied. The dressing can be removed after 24 hours but don't worry if it falls off earlier than this.

Following the injection, you will be taken back to the unit where you can relax in any comfortable position and will be given something to drink.

After the procedure you may feel as if your back is bruised and may also experience an increase in the level of your pain for a few days. Occasionally this can persist longer but will resolve. You can continue to take your usual pain relief medication.

You will need to stay in the hospital for a few hours after the procedure. A follow-up appointment will be arranged for you.

## On leaving hospital

It is important that you have a responsible adult to escort you home and, if possible, to stay with you over night. **You must not drive or use public transport to get home. You must not drive or operate any machinery for 24 hours.**

You will need to keep the injection site clean and dry. You can remove the dressing after 24 hours.

You may experience a flare-up of the pain for a few hours. After 3–4 days you should begin to feel the benefit of the injections although it may take up to 10 days for you to feel the maximum effect.

If the facet joint injections help reduce the level of your pain, please remember you still have a problem with your back. Do not rush about doing strenuous activity, but build up your activity levels slowly.

If you have been taking pain relief medication continue to take it as prescribed.

## Potential side effects of the use of steroids

There are very few side effects associated with occasional use of steroids as the dose used in these injections is small as compared to daily oral intake for conditions like asthma. Hot flushes, mild abdominal discomfort, and menstrual irregularity may occur. Control of diabetes will require extra care as blood sugar will tend to be higher. These side effects will settle in few days.

## Are there any risks associated with facet joint injections?

- Strict sterile techniques are used so the risk of infection is very small.
- The skin and soft tissue can become bruised as a result of the injections. This is usually mild and settles after a few days.
- The injection itself may cause a temporary flare-up of pain. This however should start to settle within a few hours. The maximum benefit from the injection will usually occur within 3–4 days. Occasionally it may take up to 10 days. Only around 50% of patients will expect to achieve significant pain relief from the injections.

**If you have any concerns or require advice after the procedure, contact your GP or the Pain Management Unit on 01473 703435.**

Please ask if you need this leaflet in an alternative format.