

Diagnostic Lumbar Facet Joint Medial Branch Block

Facet joints are small joints that allow movement of the spine. Less than 4 in every 10 people with back pain may have pain arising from the facet joints. The nerves that carry information from the facet joints are called the 'medial branch of the dorsal rami'. Current National Guidelines recommend offering a test injection called a 'diagnostic medial branch block' to see how much these joints may be contributing to back pain. These injections may be considered for some people with moderate to severe low back pain who have not responded to other recommended treatments.

Benefits

Pain relief: If significant, but short term relief is achieved, a 'radiofrequency denervation' may be considered to achieve longer term pain relief.

Risks

Very Common: More than 1 person in 10 are affected

No benefit: Injection treatments are not always effective and you may not be offered a radiofrequency denervation.

Common: between 1 in 10 and 1 in 100 people are affected

Tenderness and / or bruising: Mild local tenderness and / or bruising may occur at the site of injection and usually settles over the first few days

Uncommon: Between 1 in 100 and 1 in 1,000 are affected

Numbness and/or weakness: The local anaesthetic may rarely spread causing some numbness and/or weakness in your legs and other areas. Should this occur, the effect is temporary and will rapidly resolve over minutes or rarely hours

Rare: Between 1 in 1,000 and 1 in 10,000 people are affected

Infection: This is rare. You should seek medical help if there is local warmth or redness over the site of injection with tenderness and/or you feel hot and unwell. This may require antibiotic treatment.

Allergy: Injected local anaesthetic may rarely cause an allergic reaction

Very Rare: Fewer than 1 in 10,000 people are affected

Nerve injury: There are important nerves in the spine, but serious nerve injury is very rare. Injury to nerves that supply muscles to your leg can lead to foot drop for lumbar injections causing you to be unable to lift your foot up. Great care is taken during the procedure to avoid this very rare complication by placing the needles carefully under x-ray guidance. The nerve is only treated when the doctor is confident that they are in the right position.