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Spinal Injections

A spinal injection is a non-surgical treatment that may provide pain relief of spinal origin. A small needle is used to inject a steroid medication and a local anesthetic into the spine in the cervical, thoracic, or lumbar region. The medication can reduce inflammation of irritated spinal nerves and give pain relief for back, shooting arm, or leg pain. Each injection is precisely placed at the source of the pain using x-ray guidance and contrast dye to verify accurate needle position.

Types of Injections

Facet Joint Injections

The facet joints are small joints in the cervical, thoracic, and lumbar levels of the spine that provide stability and allow movement. Facet joints can cause neck or back pain when they become affected by arthritis, injury, or mechanical stress. In a facet joint injection, a needle is used under x-ray guidance to deliver steroid and anesthetic medication into the joint providing anti-inflammatory and pain relieving effect. Relief is often temporary and best results occur when treatment is combined with physical therapy or exercise.

Epidural Spinal Injection

During an epidural steroid injection a needle is used under x-ray guidance to inject steroid medication into the epidural space over the sac surrounding the spinal cord or nerves. The injected medication provides anti-inflammatory and pain relieving effect. This injection is most helpful for pain shooting down the arm or leg. The injection may provide both pain relief and diagnostic information about the source of the pain.

Sacroiliac Joint Injection

The sacroiliac joints connect the sacrum with the hip on both the right and left sides. Irritation in the joints is common in people with back pain, and can produce pain low in the buttocks. In a sacroiliac joint injection, a needle is used under x-ray guidance to deliver steroid and anesthetic medication into the joint, providing anti-inflammatory and pain relieving effect.

Patient Preparation for the Injection Procedure

You will be asked to discontinue anti-coagulant (blood-thinning) medications, including medications such as ibuprofen, prior to the procedure as discussed in the office. If you are taking aspirin for a heart condition, you may continue the aspirin, but discuss this with your physician prior to procedure.

If you are having anesthesia for your injection, avoid eating or drinking after midnight the night prior to the procedure, and arrange for a ride to and from the facility.

What to Expect After the Procedure

Tenderness at the insertion site can occur for a few hours after the procedure. An ice pack can be applied for 10-15 minutes twice an hour. Avoid strenuous activity for the remainder of the day, and normal activity may be resumed the following day. The injected steroid may cause temporary increased pain for the first 3 days after the procedure before feeling the benefits of pain relief. It may take up to two weeks to feel relief from the injection. Your follow-up appointment will usually be around two weeks after the injection.

The success and the length of pain relief from the injection are variable for each patient. It is important to follow up with your doctor to discuss any further treatments.

Possible Side Effects

- Localized, increased pain
- Headache, facial flushing, anxiety, sleeplessness
- Fever the night following the injection
- Increased blood sugar

If any of these symptoms persist, please call your doctor.

Long-term risks of treatment with steroid medications include bone loss, increased blood sugars, and immune problems. It is generally recommended to have no more than three sets of these injections in a six-month period.

Complications

Spinal headaches are severe headaches that are worse in an upright position and improve when lying down. Treatment includes lying flat for 48 hours, increasing fluid intake as well as caffeine intake. The headache usually improves within a few days, but if not, treatments such as a blood patch can help.

While extremely rare, nerve damage or spinal cord stroke can occur after the injection. Infection or bleeding in the spine have also been reported.

High fever, stiff neck, or worsening weakness in the arms or legs could be a sign of a serious problem. Call 911 if these symptoms are present.