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## FACET SYNDROME – FACET BLOCKS

I would like to take this opportunity to explain more carefully the process of facet syndrome and the treatment options available for it. Facet syndrome is the term used for either soft tissue injury or arthritis of the facet joints in the back or the neck. This pain may be a severe ache and result in spasm of the back or neck muscles with subsequent entrapment of the nerves, causing pain radiating into the arms, legs or head.

Treatment consists of conservative means such as physical therapy, chiropractic or tens unit utilization. Other treatment alternatives include surgery or the use of an abdominal or lumbar support.

The procedures available in the way of invasive pain management include facet joint injections, with the subsequent option of destruction of the nerves utilizing radiofrequency lesioning (radiofrequency rhizotomy). The initial step of facet joint injections involves the placement of a small needle into or around the joint with the injection of local anesthetic and long acting cortisone placed at that joint. Because this procedure can be uncomfortable it is routinely done with the assistance of an anesthesiologist. Most often this is done at a same day surgery center on an outpatient basis. Fluoroscopy is used to help guide placement of the needles and insure optimal results. Similar to epidural steroid injections a relatively small amount of anti-inflammatory medication can in this way be accurately placed near the affected area. This provides for more effective treatment and less side effects.

The goal for successful treatment is at least a 50% reduction in the discomfort. This will hopefully allow for return to normal function within a minimum of three months. Some back strengthening exercises may also help hasten the return to normal function. Unlike disc lesions where resolution may be short term, facet joints will take longer to heal and some minimal discomfort may persist for up to two to three years. If the relief of pain is significant and lasts at least six months, repeat facet joint injections can be done.

This is a safe and conservative means of therapy that has been employed for the last 20 to 30 years. I need to point out that there are always risks and these will be discussed with you in person. Reactions to the drugs used can also occur. While any of the risks can be potentially serious, fortunately they are extremely rare. Probably the chance of serious injury is greater driving to the surgery center where the injection is to be performed.



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Should the blocks be successful but the duration of relief short term, there are nerve destruction techniques such as radiofrequency rhizotomy which can then be employed to deliver longer term relief.

This procedure will be done in a surgery center by Dr. Jaffe on an outpatient basis. You should be seen in the office prior to the day of surgery to sign permits and to pick up orders for pre-op blood work or other studies that need to be done prior to the surgery. You will need to go to the surgery center to pre-register at least one day prior to the procedure. The evening prior to the procedure you should have nothing to eat or drink after midnight. On the day of your procedure you will be admitted to the surgery center and have an intravenous started. The anesthesiologist will discuss the anesthetic planned with you. You will be taken to the operating room, although this is not a true surgical procedure. You will be lying on your stomach and your back will be washed off with a sterile solution. After you have been sedated by the anesthesiologist, local anesthetic will be used to numb up the skin. In the case of the facet blocks, the needle will then be positioned into the joint utilizing fluoroscopy or "instant x-ray" to help guide the needle placement. The injection will then be made. The procedure takes approximately ten minutes to complete and you will then go to the recovery room where you will be allowed to fully awaken, dress and go home. Because there is local anesthetic in the injected mixture you should notice immediate relief, if the facet joints are in fact the problem. Most people will notice relief within the first day or two. You will be seen in the office approximately one week post operatively to evaluate the results.