

Facet Syndrome

Spinal arthritis, also termed facet syndrome, is one of the most common causes of back pain affecting individuals at any age. Facet syndrome can cause pain in any part of the spine from the neck down to the lower back. The facet joints are about the size of a thumbnail and are located at every level of the spine on both sides. They have cartilage and are susceptible to arthritis just like the hip or the knee.



It is most common in adults over the age of 50 due to wear and tear or arthritis. It typically affects younger individuals as the result of an injury or overuse. Millions of individuals suffer from Facet syndrome, but through proper diagnosis and treatment, the pain can be mitigated and even eliminated.

What is Facet Syndrome and why does it develop?

Facet syndrome occurs in the spine. It attacks the small joints between vertebrae known as facet joints. The facet joints are almost always in motion as they provide the spine the capacity to move and protect the upper body. The surfaces of facet joints are covered with cartilage allowing the joints to move freely without friction.

As individuals age, the cartilage begins to wear down and in many instances cause bone spurs to grow. The friction caused by lack of cartilage along with increased bone growth (bone spurs) leads to swelling, tenderness, stiffness and pain.

There are several reasons facet syndrome develops. It can be as a result of the natural aging process or a result of a spinal injury. Risk factors for developing facet syndrome include:

- Normal aging process
- Being overweight or obese

- Family history of facet syndrome
- Diseases and conditions including gout, arthritis, osteoporosis, infections
- Overuse due to occupation or sports, activities
- Damage caused by whiplash or other type of accident/injury

What are the Symptoms of Facet Syndrome?

Individuals that develop facet syndrome report that symptoms such as neck and back pain begin to manifest after exercise or activity with the pain subsiding after a short amount of time. As the condition progresses, the pain becomes more frequent and intense, and can be triggered by very little activity.



It typically affects one joint at the beginning, but as time progresses without treatment, more joints are affected resulting in stronger symptoms. The main symptoms of facet syndrome include:

- Pain that seems to be worse in the morning, evening and during weather changes
- Pain experienced in the lower back and stretches into the buttocks, upper legs and pelvis
- Neck pain that radiates into the upper back and shoulders
- Headaches starting at the base of the skull accompanied with pain behind the eyes and ringing in the ears
- Decrease inflexibility accompanied with increased difficulty bending
- Grinding noise of bone rubbing on bone
- Curvature in the spine
- Weakness and numbness in legs and/or arms – from associated spinal stenosis

- Increased symptoms after sitting for a long period of time

How is Facet Syndrome Diagnosed?

Getting an accurate diagnosis is critical in the treatment of facet syndrome. It can be difficult to diagnose given the complexity of the neck, back and spine as well as the many causes of neck and back pain. Accurately determining the genesis of the pain is paramount to successful treatment moving forward.



Spinal arthritis in facet joints can lead to degenerative scoliosis.

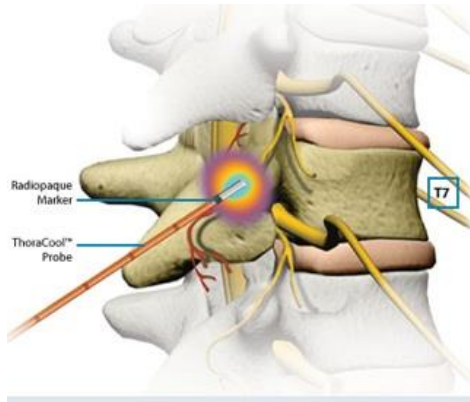
Diagnosis generally begins with a thorough examination which includes medical history, physical examination and an evaluation of current symptoms. It is often necessary to complete a battery of diagnostic imaging tests such as x-ray, CT scan, MRI and blood tests.

These tests not only diagnose facet syndrome, but are used to rule out other health issues. Additionally, a pain specialist may elect to perform a [facet joint injection](#). This test not only relieves pain, but can pinpoint the exact location of the pain.

Along with x-ray technology, this exam can locate and target the source of the pain and provide relief of symptoms. The immediate feedback is quite helpful for the patient and attending physician.

How is Facet Syndrome Treated?

There are a variety of treatment options available to individuals suffering from facet syndrome. Typically, a pain management doctor will start off with non-surgical treatments that are very effective for many individuals.



Radiofrequency denervation may provide up to 18 months of pain relief for spinal arthritis.

Measures such as anti-inflammatory and pain medication, heat treatments, reduced activity, physical therapy and weight loss are used to reduce symptoms right away. Long-term, non-surgical methods such as facet joint injections and radiofrequency denervation ([radiofrequency ablation](#)) are used to mitigate symptoms over a longer period of time. Researchers found that facet joint nerve blocks combined with anesthetic injections are effective in treating chronic low back pain associated with facet joint syndrome (Manchikanti 2007).

Radiofrequency ablation has been shown to provide long term relief for facet related pain, between six and eighteen months. Along with the other treatments available such as PT, chiropractic, TENS units and spinal decompression therapy, patients usually reach a tolerable baseline level of pain. Surgery for facet arthritis is a last resort, elective option. If a person has arthritis in one facet joint, it is usually present in multiple. Fusing the spine for arthritis presents potential future problems with adjacent level accelerated arthritis. So it is not usually recommended unless there are extenuating conditions like instability or severe scoliosis.