
THE CENTER FOR PAIN MEDICINE MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL

MEDIAL BRANCH BLOCKS (BLOCKS OF THE NERVES TO THE FACET JOINTS)

Information Sheet for Patients

What is a medial branch block? A medial branch block is an injection of a local anesthetic (numbing medication) near the medial branch nerves. These small nerves carry pain signals from the facet joints of the spine. The facet joints are located between the vertebrae; there are two facet joints between each pair of vertebrae. The facet joints provide stability while allowing the spine the ability to bend and twist. With wear and tear and with normal aging, the facet joints can become painful.

What is the goal of a medial branch block? The goal of medial branch blocks is to temporarily numb the facet joints to see if they are causing your pain. If you experience pain relief immediately following the procedure, your physician is assured that one or more facet joints are causing your pain. However, medial branch blocks are only a way to diagnose the cause of your pain, and they are not expected to produce pain relief for more than a few hours. If medial branch blocks produce temporary relief, then radiofrequency treatment may be used to produce longer-term pain relief.

What happens before treatment? You will be escorted to a room where a nurse will conduct a pre-procedure interview. The physician who will perform the injection reviews your medical history, previous imaging studies, physical exam and current medications to help plan the best approach for the injection.

What happens during the procedure? The patient remains awake during the entire process. Blood pressure, heart rate and breathing are continually monitored. Lying face down on the procedure table the injection site is cleansed with an antiseptic. This procedure involves inserting a needle through the skin, muscle and soft tissues, so there is some slight discomfort involved. An injection of local anesthetic (numbing medication) will be administered in the area where you are experiencing pain. This procedure takes approximately 30 minutes.

