Medial branch block

What is a medial branch block?

Facet joints are the joints that connect bones in your back and allow you to move, bend, and twist. Just like any joints, these joints can get arthritic over time. Facet joint pain is one of the most common causes of low back pain and neck pain. Tiny nerve branches called medial branch nerves supply the feeling for these joints. It is possible to provide relief of facet joint pain by targeting these nerves. To diagnose facet joint pain, these nerves may be temporarily numbed through an injection of local anesthetic. This initial medial branch nerve block is temporary lasting 8 to 12 hours only. During this time, you evaluate how much pain relief you are getting. This helps decide the next step in your treatment. A medial branch block will see if you may be candidate for a procedure called a radiofrequency ablation to deaden these nerve endings temporarily. This can provide pain relief for chronic pain associated with the facet joints for an average of 6 to 18 months. Your pain management doctor can evaluate your symptoms and decide if this procedure may be right for you.

How is the procedure performed?

A medial branch block is done as a quick outpatient procedure, typically in an ambulatory surgery center using x-ray, otherwise known as fluoroscopy. You will be positioned lying on your stomach with blankets covering you while the area just surrounding either your back or your neck is cleaned an aseptic solution. Your physician will the identify the location of the medial branch nerves for each painful joint using fluoroscopy. Once the anatomy is visualized, your physician will inject a small amount of local anesthetic to numb the skin at the entry point. Once numb, your physician will direct a small needle to the medial branch nerve, which is located just to the outside of the facet joint. After confirming a good position, a small amount of local anesthetic is injected through the needle to numb the nerve. This procedure is done at each level that is painful. The procedure generally takes less than 10 minutes.

How effective is a medial branch block?

The medial branch block is the most reliable and accurate procedure to diagnosis painful facet joint syndrome. It also provides a greater than 65% positive predictive factor that you will respond to the radiofrequency ablation procedure that can provide long-lasting relief of facet joint pain. Even if the procedure does not provide pain relief during the testing period, that still serves as valuable diagnostic information that is helpful your physician to help guide your treatment.

What risks are involved with a medial branch block?

A medial branch block is a low risk procedure. The injection site this to the side of the spine. Risks include bleeding, infection, damage to the nerve or surrounding structures, allergic reaction to medications, and soreness after the procedure. Lack of pain relief is not a risk with this procedure at it is a diagnostic test only.

What happens after a medial branch block?

After this procedure is performed, you will be given a worksheet to take home to record the amount of pain relief you receive for the following 24 hours. During the test, you should perform activities that are normally painful for you to best evaluate the amount of relief you received during this testing. After 8-12 hours, the numbing medicine will wear off, and your pain will return. At this point, the test is considered complete. In the days following the test, you will either return to your physician's office or call your physician's office to discuss results of the test. Do not drive or perform any vigorous activity for 12-24 hours after the procedure. You can return to normal activities the following day. You will be able to resume your normal diet and medications. Your physician will schedule your follow up appointment.

Is a medial branch block right for me?

If you have chronic low back or neck pain, a medial branch block may benefit you. Talk to your physician about your symptoms and he or she will help decide what is right for you.