

Facet Syndrome

Facet syndrome describes pain that a person feels most typically in the neck or in the back that is due to an inflamed facet joint. Facet joints are small joints in the back that, along with the disk, share the stress and weight of a person. The two facet joints and the intervertebral disk take the weight in the back. Facet syndrome occurs when a joint becomes inflamed and painful.

Patients with facet syndrome can typically experience this in the neck, especially after a whiplash-type injury, a rear-end collision or an injury in which a person is thrown backwards thus putting significant stress and possibly inflammation on the facet joints.

Patients with facet syndrome present in a unique fashion. First, the pain from the facet is often interpreted by the brain as radiating into another area of the body.

In the neck, the upper cervical facets often cause patients to experience pain radiating into the back of a person's head and sometimes this will cause a headache which radiates pain over the top of the person's head and sometimes into the eye. Head pain can also radiate into the ear when the upper facets in the neck are involved. If the lower joints in the neck are involved, patients often feel pain radiating into the shoulder and upper portion of the arm as well as radiating into the shoulder blade. Muscle spasm is often associated with facet inflammation.

In the low back area, upper facet involvement can cause patients to experience pain radiating into the groin whereas lower facet involvement causes patients to experience pain radiating into the hip, buttocks and down the back or the side of the upper leg almost always stopping above the knee.

Patients with Facet Syndrome have a unique story to tell. First, they are often much worse in the morning when they first wake up. They feel terribly stiff and need time in the morning and a hot shower in order to get more comfortable. They then do well so long as they are moving about and later in the day feel worse again. Patients who have had facet syndrome for a long time often complain of worse pain with weather changes or going to cold, damp climates. Patients with neck facet pain complain that their pain is aggravated when they turn their head, especially when they are driving and trying to look behind them. Looking up is often more painful than looking down.

Similarly, for patients who have back facet syndrome, movements that are twisting or extending backwards often cause more pain than bending forward. It is quite common for women to complain of more pain with vacuuming, emptying the dishwasher or working at the sink and men complain more often of pain with shaving. This means that any posture that is slightly leaning forward, but not bending all the way forward, is experienced as painful.

On physical exam, it is very common for patients with neck, back or low back syndrome to be tender when the doctor presses over these joints. It is also very common that movements in the exam room that cause the joints to close cause pain. This means that bending backwards or looking up are movements that should normally cause more pain than bending the neck or back forward in a slow and stretching manner.

These patients tend to get much worse when they are still and this can be during sleep, long car drives, watching a movie or working on a computer.

Treatment for this condition usually involves muscle relaxants, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications like ibuprofen or naproxen sodium, brief courses of physical



Headaches

