

# Low back facet joint pain

*Your treatment options. Your second opinion.*



## **What is low back facet joint pain?**

Your low back may be affected by a condition called facet joint pain that most frequently causes pain in the low back and possibly also in the groin, thigh, lower leg and foot.

Facet joints are found in pairs, on the left and right side at the back of each of the vertebrae (bones) of your spine. The facet joints are just like any other joint such as your shoulder or knee. They allow movements of your spine to occur such as bending and turning, and also have nerves that cause you to feel pain, called the 'medial branch' nerves.

Facet joint pain is most often due to repeated stress and accumulated minor injuries that may lead to degenerative changes (osteoarthritis) and inflammation that affect the whole joint and nearby tissues. These changes are more likely to occur the older you are.

## **Treatment options**

Non-surgical treatments may often be suggested for your initial treatment. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, your low back pain may also be caused by other structures such as discs, nerves and muscles, however there are usually no simple tests that can identify exactly which structure is causing your pain.

Fortunately though, non-surgical treatments may often help achieve improvement, regardless of the structure at fault. Low back pain may even get better on its own without treatment.

## **Non-surgical treatments**

Non-surgical treatments that may be effective for facet joint pain specifically, and low back pain regardless of the cause, include:

- > Keeping active as much as possible, doing your normal work and leisure activities.
- > Medications such as paracetamol to reduce pain and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) for pain and inflammation.
- > Manual therapy, where a qualified professional may use massage, manipulation or acupuncture to reduce pain.
- > Heat and cold packs to the low back.

All treatments may have side effects.

## **Radiofrequency denervation**

If non-surgical treatments aren't helping your low back pain sufficiently, particularly if it's chronic (three months or more), a test to diagnose facet joint pain and radiofrequency denervation treatment may be suggested to you. This is a two-step process:

- > Firstly, a diagnostic facet joint block test is used to diagnose low back facet joint pain. Performed in a hospital, it involves injecting anaesthesia into the facet joint or near the 'medial branch' nerves to numb (block) pain sensation. The diagnostic block may be done once or twice.

If your pain is sufficiently reduced, this may indicate it's coming from your facet joints. For some people the diagnostic block test may provide long term pain relief. The test takes up to 30 minutes.

- > Secondly, if the diagnostic facet joint block test does indicate that your pain is coming from your facet joints, radiofrequency denervation may often be suggested to you.

Radiofrequency denervation (also called radiofrequency neurotomy, ablation or lesioning) is usually performed in a hospital and you may be sedated.

It involves inserting a needle to the 'medial branch' nerves, which your doctor carefully monitors using special x-rays (fluoroscope). The needle then supplies high frequency electric current that destroys the nerve fibres that normally send pain information to your brain. This may be done up to five times on each nerve, repeated at three to four vertebrae levels. The procedure may take 45-60 minutes.

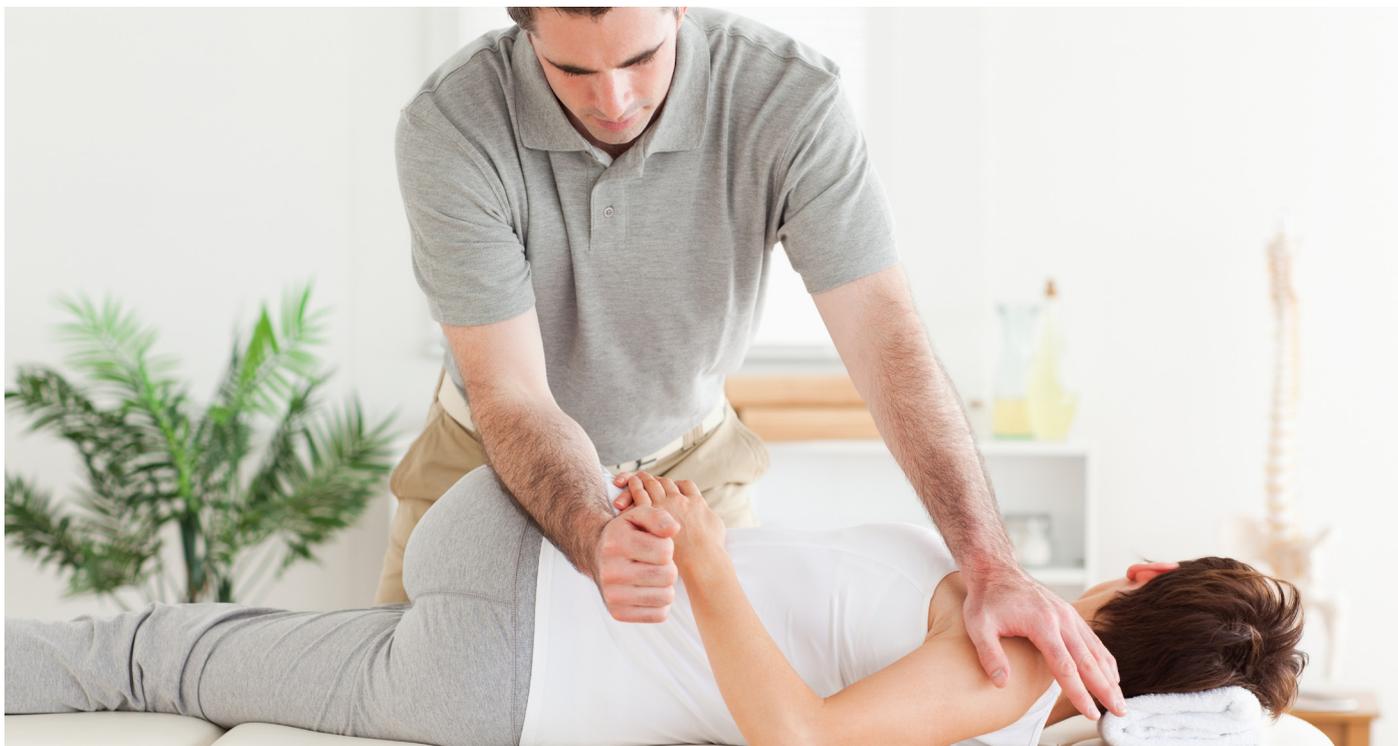
## **How you can help your low back pain**

The following may help you recover from low back pain and prevent it coming back:

- > Avoid sudden movements
- > Reduce stress, anxiety and tension
- > Strengthening and flexibility exercises
- > Fitness activities such as walking and swimming
- > Good posture
- > Use your legs, not your back, when lifting heavy objects.
- > Maintain a healthy weight

***Always consult a medical expert before commencing a course of treatment for any medical condition.***





In some patients Radiofrequency denervation may reduce or stop pain for 6-12 months, but it is short lived. It's not a permanent cure because the nerve eventually grows back and pain may often return. While the treatment can be repeated, the number may be limited due to x-ray exposure.

### **Radiofrequency denervation and medical research**

When evaluating you for radiofrequency denervation or other treatments for facet joint pain specifically, or low back pain in general, your treating medical specialist will take into account many complex factors, including the latest medical research.

Studies have found that for some people with low back pain who have a diagnostic facet joint block test that indicates facet joints are the cause of pain, radiofrequency denervation may be effective for reducing pain.

However, studies have also found that some diagnostic facet joint block tests may provide inaccurate results that indicate the facet joint is the cause, when in fact it isn't (called a false positive). As a result, when radiofrequency denervation may be performed, there is no reduction in pain because another structure is the cause.

The research also shows that radiofrequency denervation may often be less effective when done after one (not two) diagnostic block during the diagnostic facet joint block test and/or your pain is not maximally reduced as a result of the test.

### **Radiofrequency denervation and risks**

Complications of radiofrequency denervation and diagnostic facet joint block tests are not common. They may include local swelling, pain at needle insertion site, numbness, paralysis, and bowel and bladder problems.

Understanding the risks is important, particularly given the possibility that radiofrequency denervation may be less

effective if a diagnostic facet joint block test is inaccurate or not performed sufficiently.

### **Radiofrequency denervation and facet joint pain - the main points**

- > If non-surgical treatments aren't helping your low back pain sufficiently, particularly if it's chronic (three months or more), a diagnostic facet joint block test and radiofrequency denervation may be suggested to you.
- > If you're considering radiofrequency denervation, take into account that radiofrequency denervation may be effective for reducing pain, however it may be less effective if a diagnostic facet joint block test is inaccurate or not performed sufficiently.
- > Put into practice self-help measures that may help you recover from low back pain and prevent it

### **Would you like a second opinion?**

Deciding on a treatment path for a medical condition can be a difficult, complex and stressful question.

Would you like the benefit of an expert second opinion to help you to decide on your treatment options?

**If you want to know more about GPS<sup>2</sup> or have a general enquiry, please contact us on 1800 477 246 or email via [contact@gps2.com.au](mailto:contact@gps2.com.au)**

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