

Diagnostic Medial Branch Blocks

A diagnostic medial branch block is a test to find the cause of your neck and back pain. During the test, your doctor will inject a numbing medication around the nerve that carries pain signals from your facet joints. These are the joints in your spine that allow you to bend and twist your neck and back. The amount of pain relief you feel after the injection will help your doctor determine the cause of your pain and how to treat it.

How to prepare

Once your test is scheduled, we will give you instructions on how to prepare. For your safety, please tell us if you:

- Take a blood thinner (ex. warfarin/Coumadin, Lovenox or Plavix);
- Take anything that contains aspirin or anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve)
- Have a condition that prevents your blood from clotting normally; or
- Have any allergies to latex, local anesthetics or X-ray dye

Please plan to have someone drive you home after your procedure. If someone cannot drive you home, the test may be canceled. Also, the test can be done only on a day when you have your typical pain. If you do not have your typical pain on the day the test is scheduled, we will need to reschedule.

Does the test hurt?

Before the test begins, your doctor will inject you with a medication called a local anesthetic. This will numb the skin over the area of the facet joints. You may feel some stinging from the needle or anesthetic. You may also feel some pressure when your doctor injects the numbing medication in the area around the facet joints.

What to expect

A medial branch block generally involves these steps:

1. You will be taken to a patient waiting area. There we will check your ID band, measure your vital signs (such as your blood pressure and pulse if required) and ask you some basic questions about your health
2. Then you will be taken to the procedure room where the doctor will ask for your consent to do the procedure
3. You will lie face down on a table. Your back will be cleaned and covered with a special sheet. This will help keep the area free of germs.
4. Your doctor will numb the skin over the facet joints in your spine with a local anesthetic. This will help prevent discomfort during the test.
5. Then your doctor will inject the numbing medication in the area around the joints. Usually, patients need 6 injections (3 injections on each side of the spine).

Throughout the test, your doctor may use a special X-ray machine to help view your joints. He or she may also inject a substance called contrast, which will highlight the joints on the X-rays. If you are allergic to contrast, your doctor will discuss your options with you before the test.

The test takes about 10-15 minutes. You will be awake during the test and may ask questions at any time.

Possible side effects

Side effects from a medial branch block are rare. The most common side effect is pain at the sites of injection. For a short while, you may also feel a little dizzy (if you had an injection in your neck) or numbness in your arm or leg.

After the test

Be as active as possible. Do the activities that usually cause pain in your neck or back. This will help your doctor know if your pain is caused by irritated facet joints.

Keep track of your pain for 4 hours after your test. Your doctor will give you a diary to write down your pain levels.

If you have pain relief after the test, you might have irritated facet joints. Daily wear and tear can bother these joints and cause your pain.

Your doctor will work with you to find the best treatment option. A common option is a procedure called radiofrequency denervation. Your doctor will give you more information about this procedure.

Your pain relief from the test will last only 3-4 hours. You will probably feel your regular level of pain afterwards because the numbing medication will wear off.

If you have no pain relief after the test, your doctor will work with you to find the source of your pain and explore your treatment options.

If you have any questions, please call the Spine Center at 617-754-5246 and select option 2.