



Lumbar and Thoracic Medial Branch Blocks – Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a medial branch block?

A medial branch block is a specialized injection of numbing medicine that blocks (or temporarily turns off) certain nerves in the spine. These nerves, called “medial branches,” are pain sensing nerves that send pain signals from joints in the spine (called “facet joints”) to your brain. A fluoroscopy (x-ray) machine is used to help guide the needle to the correct place. Before the lidocaine is injected, dye is injected first to ensure it is in a safe and accurate place. Generally speaking, the procedure involves anywhere from two to four injections on each side.

2. Why are medial branch blocks done?

Medial branch blocks are performed to determine whether or not the facet joints are really causing the back or neck pain. If a medial branch block provides good (at least 80%) relief of your pain, then you may be a candidate for a radiofrequency ablation. If a medial branch block provides no (or minimal) pain relief, then the facet joints are likely not the cause of pain and radiofrequency ablation is not indicated.

3. How long does the pain relief last?

Medial branch blocks are done at two different times to make sure that the facet joints are the true pain generators. The first time the procedure is done, a short acting numbing medicine (Lidocaine) is used, and the pain is expected to be relieved for 1-2 hours. The second time the procedure is done, a longer acting numbing medicine (Marcaine) is used, and the pain is expected to be relieved for at least three hours, and typically for four to six hours. It is important to note that medial branch blocks are test procedures only so pain relief is temporary.

4. I had two medial branch blocks and attained good relief each time. Now what?

The next indicated procedure is a radiofrequency ablation (see our separate handout on this).

5. I had a medial branch block with no pain relief. Now what?

If a medial branch block provided no pain relief, then the facet joints are not the true pain generators. At this point you would need to be reevaluated by the physician to determine the cause of your pain.

6. Are medial branch blocks painful?

Everyone will feel a “pinch and burn” when the local numbing medicine is injected. Beyond that it is normal to feel pressure as the needle travels to the target. Usually patients only feel mild discomfort during these procedures.

7. Can I get sedation for this procedure?

Unfortunately sedation is not recommended for this procedure. Because this is a test procedure, sedation makes it difficult to determine whether pain relief (if present) is due to the numbing medicine or the sedation.

8. What are the risks of medial branch blocks?

Risks include but are not limited to bleeding, infection, nerve damage, paralysis, and reaction to the medications used. Serious reactions are exceptionally rare.

9. When can I have a medial branch block? Why can't I have it today?

Medial branch blocks are highly specialized procedures that require the use of a fluoroscopy (x-ray) machine, a physician trained to do these procedures, an x-ray technician, and a nurse. In many cases they require insurance authorization as well. Before a medial branch block, you also cannot eat anything for six hours or drink anything for two hours. Because of these reasons, medial branch blocks are scheduled on certain days. Prior to any procedure, a clinic visit is typically done to review imaging, discuss the procedure in depth, review risks and benefits, and give the patient a chance to ask any questions. This helps the procedure run smoothly.

10. Why do I need to not eat or drink anything before the procedure?

Because of the position you will be in (prone or on the stomach), there is a small risk of aspiration. This occurs when the contents of the stomach go up the esophagus and then back down the windpipe.

12. How long does it take for a medial branch block to take effect?

Pain relief (if present) is usually immediate, however it can take several minutes to take effect.

13. Why do I need a driver?

Medial branch blocks use numbing medicine, which can temporarily cause the leg to feel numb. This makes it dangerous to drive after the procedure. We recommend asking a friend or family member to drive you and do not allow taxis, as a taxi driver will not be able to help you get into your home if needed. If you arrive without a driver, you may be asked to reschedule.

14. How long will it take to do the medial branch block?

You will be in our office for 1-1.5 hours. This includes checking in, reviewing risks and signing a consent form, performing the medial branch block, and recovering. The actual medial branch block takes less than 15 minutes in most cases.

15. My first medial branch block provided two hours of good relief...should I keep my next medial branch block appointment?

Yes. Medial branch blocks must be done twice to be absolutely certain that the facet joints are the true pain generators.

16. What should I do after the medial branch block?

As long as your legs do not feel numb, you may resume your normal activity. This is actually encouraged to make sure that the pain relief lasts the appropriate length of time. It is recommended that you keep a pain diary for several hours to determine if the procedure worked and for how long. It is OK to travel the day of the medial branch block including plane travel (however avoid driving for at least six hours after the medial branch block). Avoid soaking or submerging the injection area for 48 hours – this includes baths, hot tubs, or pools. Regular showers are OK. The band-aid placed at the injection site may be removed the same day of the procedure.

17. Under what circumstances should I call your office?

Call our office immediately if you experience a severe headache, severe pain in the arm or leg, redness or drainage at the site of the injection, fevers, chills, or weakness that is worse after the time you leave the clinic. These symptoms are very rare. If you feel you require immediate medical care, call 911.

18. Why do I need to arrive 30 minutes prior to my scheduled procedure?

Medial branch blocks involve a thorough check-in procedure which includes verifying the exact procedure and reviewing the risks and benefits of the injection. Therefore to help ensure our procedures run as smoothly as possible, we ask patients to arrive 30 minutes prior to their scheduled medial branch block. If you arrive late, you may be asked to reschedule. Please let us know at least 24 hours in advance if you need to reschedule or cancel your procedure. A “noshow” may result in a \$100 fee.