

Facet Joint Syndrome

Facet joints are connections between all of the bones in the spine. The nerve roots pass through the joints to extend from the arms to the spinal cord, legs and various other parts of the body. These joints allow the spine to twist and bend, while also keeping the back from slipping too far forward or twisting without any limitations. Similar to the knee joint, they have cartilage that allows smooth movements in the places where the two bones meet. The joints have a lubricating joint fluid and synovium.

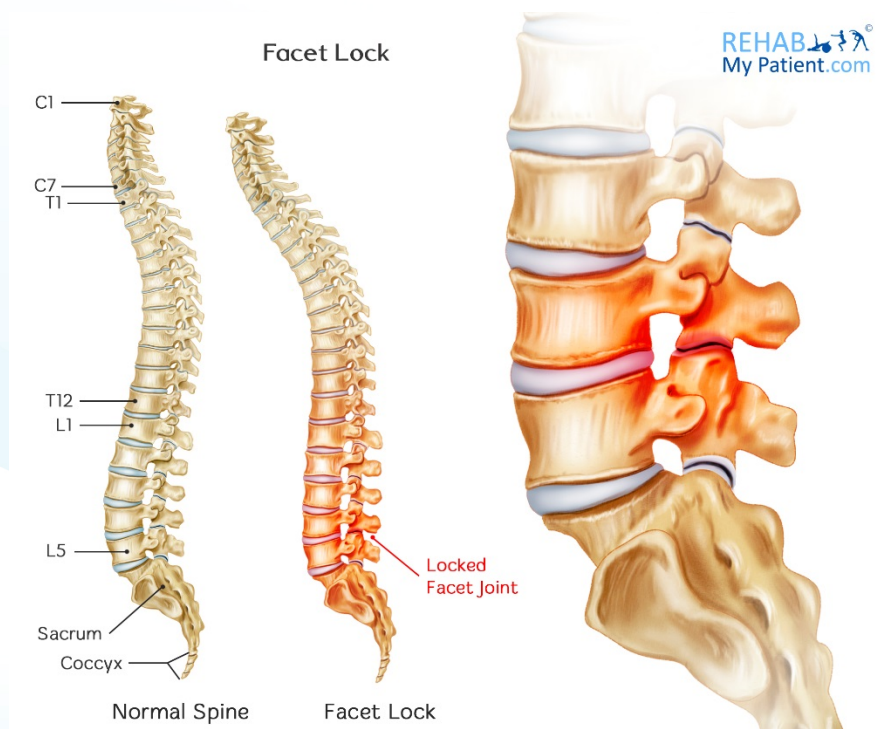
When the joints become swollen and painful due to injury or strain, it can cause pain. If the joint that is affected is in the neck, it can cause headaches and trouble with moving the head. If the problem is in the back, it can cause pain within the thighs, lower part of the back and buttocks.

Facet joint syndrome is often known as facet joint locking, or one can suffer a facet joint lock. This very painful condition typically occurs when someone forward bends to pick up something trivial like a pen, or a piece of paper. Sometimes it can occur while eating, cleaning teeth, making the bed, or loading dishes into a low cupboard. One similarity is that most often it occurs on forward bending, but can occur on extension from a forward bend.

Sometimes the pain is so bad sufferers have to lie in bed, even finding twisting to turn in bed or getting out of bed very uncomfortable. If you can get up and move gently this is often better. Sitting is usually very painful.

Facet Joint Syndrome Anatomy

The spine is made up of vertebrae that sit on top of each other to form the vertebral column, connected by pairs of facet joints at each level. It functions to provide individuals with stability and mobility for the head, while connecting it with the relative immobile thoracic spine and then connecting to the lumbar spine. The first two vertebral bodies tend to be quite different than that of the rest of the cervical spine. The atlas superiorly articulates with the occiput and inferiorly with that of the axis.



How to Treat Facet Joint Syndrome:

1. Proper Exercise

For treatment to be successful for the long-term, you need to engage in a proper exercise regime as outlined by a physical therapist or health care provider. Make sure you follow their exercise routine accordingly to avoid any further injury.

2. Good Posture

Good posture and support to the lower back when riding or seated in a car is important.

3. Heat or Cold

In terms of heat, you can use a hot water bottle, hot shower or a heat wrap. For cold, use a cold pad application to help relieve any painful episodes that may occur with the condition.

4. Caution with Forward Bending

Be careful with forward bending until your symptoms ease, because the facet joint can easily become inflamed due to the load of forward bending going through the base of the spine. This includes making the bed, household chores, and loading the dishwasher.

5. Changing Your Routine

Shortening and eliminating a long commute every day will help to alleviate pain and inflammation. Add in frequent rest breaks to make sure your joints don't become stiff or tight. Keep mobile as much as you can.



Tips:

- Pain is often described as sharp and very painful, and can occur in the lower back, upper back or neck.
- Previous whiplash injuries tend to make individuals prone to facet joint syndrome.
- Once you have had facet joint syndrome once, you tend to get it again.
- For those suffering with the syndrome, complaints of locking or severe stiffness are normal.
- Returning to normal activities is based upon individual cases and the progress made.
- If you are unable to turn without having to turn your entire body from left to right, you may be suffering with facet joint syndrome.
- Maintain good core strength to support your spine. Ask your therapist for core exercises when the pain settles down.
- Stay gently mobile – no sitting for longer than 20 minutes, and no walking for longer than 20 minutes without a break. Avoid standing in the same position for longer than 20 minutes.