

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

What Is Facet Syndrome?

The spine is an elegant and complex structure. Its 33 vertebrae — the bones that protect the spinal cord and support the head and torso — fit together with a system of joints that allow it to bend and twist.

If a problem develops in the joints of the spine, pain and limited movement may occur. One such problem that you may not have heard of is facet syndrome. This common condition is the root cause of many cases of back and neck pain. The good news is that facet syndrome can be managed. Dr. Gravesen explains the basics of facet joints, how facet syndrome develops and how chiropractic care can help.



The Basics of Facet Joints

Each vertebra has a pair of outgrowths at the top — called *superior articular facets* — and another pair at the bottom — called *inferior articular facets*. All facets are on the posterior side of the spine. Facets fit together with those of adjoining vertebrae to form facet joints. A thin layer of cartilage protects and lubricates each facet joint, which also contains a multitude of tiny nerve endings.

The facet joints work symbiotically with other structures of the vertebrae to support the back and prevent exces-

sive flexing and rotation of the spine, both of which can cause injury.

Signs and Causes

The term *facet syndrome* describes the symptoms that come with degeneration of the facet joints, meaning the breakdown of the cartilage that separates the bones in each joint. The disorder is most common in older adults (*Spine* 1988;13:966-71).

Dr. Gravesen finds that symptoms typically include dull, aching pain, particularly with movement, and tenderness of the joints when touched

through the skin. Patients with facet syndrome generally do not have leg pain, muscle pain or related neurological problems (*Pain* 1996;68:79-83).

Facet syndrome can be difficult to diagnose, and often occurs along with problems involving the *intervertebral discs* — pillow-like structures between vertebrae that cause pain if they break down or rupture.

An investigation of patients with neck pain revealed that in 41 percent of cases, pain could be pinpointed in both the discs and the facet joints of the cervical (upper) spine. In addition, 23 percent of patients' pain was solely from facet joints (*Pain* 1993;54:213).

Another study puts the blame on facet joints for up to 60 percent of neck pain and 40 percent of low-back pain (*Curr Rev Pain* 1999;3:348-58).

Some evidence shows that cervical facet syndrome often shows up secondary to whiplash, a spine injury most associated with automobile accidents. A placebo-controlled investigation published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that 60 percent of whiplash patients suffered from chronic cervical facet syndrome (*N Engl J Med* 1996;335:1721-6).

Pitfalls of Conventional Treatments

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen, aspirin, and naproxen are often recommended to relieve the pain of facet syndrome. However, Dr. Gravesen cautions against relying on drugs to treat musculoskeletal pain. Recent research calls into question the effectiveness of these painkillers against back pain (*Expert Opin Pharmacother* 2004;5:2091-8).

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When used regularly over an extended period, NSAIDs can do much more harm than good, causing gastrointestinal maladies such as ulcers and stomach bleeding. The risk of these side effects is amplified in older age.

Injected corticosteroids are another option for controlling pain from facet syndrome, but research does not show that they are effective over the long term (*Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2006:CD005328).

Surgical correction of facet syndrome by fusing vertebrae together not only carries the risks of any major surgery but also is only inconsistently effective (*Tidsskr Nor Laegeforen* 1992;112:876-80).

Chiropractic: All-Natural Solution

Research published from the University of Johannesburg heralds a safer solution for the discomfort of facet syndrome.

A group of 60 women between the ages of 18 and 40 who had experienced 30 days or more of cervical facet pain without neurological complications was randomly divided to receive one of three protocols: chiropractic care, low-level laser therapy, or a combination of the two. Patients received six sessions over a period of three weeks.

One week after completing therapies, patients who received chiropractic care reported significantly decreased pain and disability. They also reported increased ease completing daily activities.

Doctors measured the patients' range of motion and found improvements after chiropractic care. Improvements were even more pronounced in the group that received both chiropractic and low-level laser therapy (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2011;34:153-63).

In discussing the results, researchers noted that facet joints are rich in nerve endings and therefore extremely pain-sensitive. They explained that chiropractic adjustments correct abnormalities in the spine to reduce pain. Chiropractic adjustments also reduce sensitivity to pain by stimulating interneurons that curb pain signals from the nerves in the facet joints.

This study confirms earlier results showing the efficacy of chiropractic care for joint degeneration and other causes of back pain. A trial investigating osteoarthritis, and another examining degenerative disease affecting the spine, found that chiropractic improved range of motion and decreased pain (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2006;29:107-14).

Another study compared chiropractic care with NSAIDs for back pain. Chi-

ropractic adjustments cut pain severity and disability by nearly a third — results that could not be replicated by the painkillers (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2000;23:239-45).

How Chiropractic Works

Rather than depending on drugs, chiropractic champions the body's natural ability to heal itself. Chiropractic care can reduce discomfort and slow the progress of joint degeneration.

When assessing a chiropractic patient, the doctor looks for dysfunctional areas in the spine called **vertebral subluxations**. These misalignments of the vertebrae are quite common and can cause a range of symptoms, including musculoskeletal pain, neurological problems, fatigue, ear infections and a vast array of other disorders.

Using gentle maneuvers called **chiropractic adjustments**, the doctor corrects vertebral subluxations, relieving pain and improving range of motion.

Our chiropractic office also advises patients regarding other lifestyle changes to support optimal health, including nutrition, exercise and ergonomics. These components of well-being can have an impact on pain symptoms, whether by directly lessening discomfort or strengthening overall health and subsequent ability to cope with facet syndrome.

If you are seeking relief from back or neck pain and suspect that facet syndrome is to blame, drug-free relief may be just a phone call away. Schedule a chiropractic evaluation today!



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