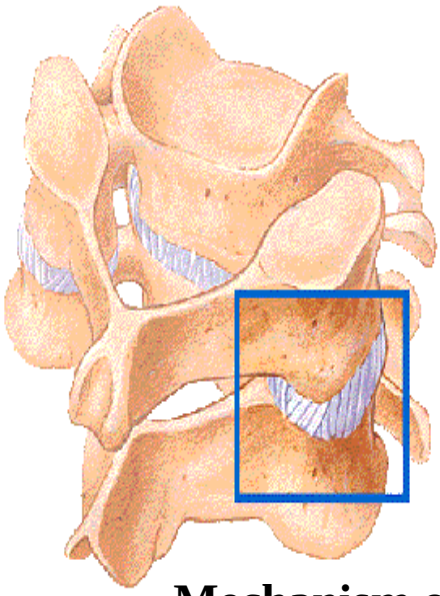
CERVICAL FACET JOINT LESION

What is a facet joint?

The facet joints are small stabilising joints located between and behind adjacent vertebrae. Their role is to allow the needed amount of mobility in order to turn, look round and bend forwards and backwards.



What is a facet joint lesion?

The sliding surfaces of the facet joints are covered by a low friction, moist cartilage. When facet joints become worn or torn the cartilage may become thin or disappear. This can cause the joints to become inflamed. When this occurs, a protective reflex arrangement arises that causes the muscles which run either side of the spine to go into spasm.

Mechanism of Injury

Most commonly in those with poor posture (poking the chin forward) or maintaining one position for too long. This overloads the facet joints and causes inflammation, swelling and pain.

Facet joint inflammation may also be a result of a twisting injury in which the cartilage around the joint becomes torn. The torn portion of cartilage can then limit mobility by forming a block within the joint. As a result, pain is produced when pressure is applied to the joint.

Disc degeneration can also cause irritation around the facet joints as can arthritis as a result of previous injury or general wear and tear.

What are the symptoms of a facet joint lesion?

- Acute episodes of cervical facet joint pain are usually intermittent and generally unpredictable. They can occur a few times per month or per year.
- Typically tilting the head backwards is more painful than leaning forwards.
- You may experience pain radiating into the shoulders, arms or upper back.
- Mobility will be limited

Other possible symptoms

Pins and needles, weakness or numbness in the arm

What will Physiotherapy consist of?

When facet joints become inflamed the muscles which run parallel to the spine contract or go into spasm as a protective mechanism. It is therefore important for your therapist to relax these muscles in order to correct abnormal curvature of the spine. Your therapist will also need to reduce the inflammation within your spine and prevent the condition from occurring in the future. This can be achieved with:

Massage encompassing a variety of techniques and is given with sufficient pressure through the superficial tissue to reach the deep lying structures. It is used to increase blood flow, decrease swelling, reduce muscle spasm and promote normal tissue repair.

Deep friction is an aggressive massage technique. It is applied across the tissue fibres. Pressure is given as deeply as possible. This technique is initially painful but can cause a numbing effect. It can be used to break down scar tissue, restore normal movement and prepare the injured structure for mobilisation or manipulation.

Mobilisation is a manual technique where the joint and soft tissues are gently moved by the physiotherapist to restore normal range, lubricate joint surfaces, and relieve pain.

Manipulation is a high speed, short movement thrust given at the end of available range. It is used to break down adhesions, remove a blockage within a joint and restore full painless movement. A click or noise may be experienced during this treatment

Ultrasonic Therapy transmits sound waves through the tissues stimulating the body's chemical reactions and therefore healing process, just as shaking a test tube in the laboratory speeds up a chemical reaction. It reduces tissue spasm, accelerates the healing process and results in pain relief.

Interferential Therapy introduces a small electrical current into the tissues and can be used at varying frequencies for differing treatment effects. E.g. pain relief, muscle or nerve stimulation, promoting blood flow and reducing swelling/inflammation.

Short Wave Diathermy emits electromagnetic waves deep into the tissues. This results in increased blood flow to the area to promote healing, gives pain relief and can produce a heating effect to soften the tissues in preparation for mobilisation/manipulation.

Other treatments that could be used

Laser Therapy emits beams of light into the tissues of the body, stimulating chemical reactions and having a similar effect to ultrasound though using light energy instead of sound energy.

Acupuncture is an oriental technique of introducing needles into the skin to increase or decrease energy flow to promote pain relief and healing.

Injection Therapy is a specialist procedure, which needs the consent of your G.P. A non-harmful steroid and/or local anaesthetic are injected directly into the injured structure. It has a dramatic effect on removing inflammation and promoting healing.

What can you do to help your condition?

Analgesia / Anti-inflammatory medication– In consultation with your GP or Pharmacist these types of medication may provide significant pain relief.

Heat Packs- The application of a hot pack to the neck may be beneficial in helping the muscles to relax, promote blood flow to the area and provide pain relief

Posture – good posture enables the muscles of the spine to act as a supporting structure and decreases the strain on the joints of the spine.

Ergonomics - ensure that all your seating is encouraging you to attain good posture and your mattress is supporting your spine adequately.

A firm supporting pillow - seems to help some people when sleeping but may aggravate others.

Exercise/Postural programme – comply with the prescribed exercise/postural programme. Your physio will instruct you as to which of the above exercises to begin with, when to add the others, as well as how to progress the exercises.

1.

Rotations

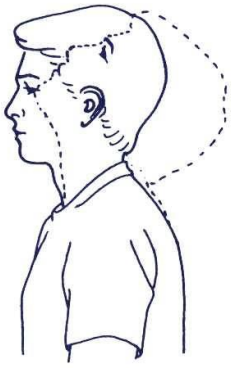
2.a

Side flexion

2.b

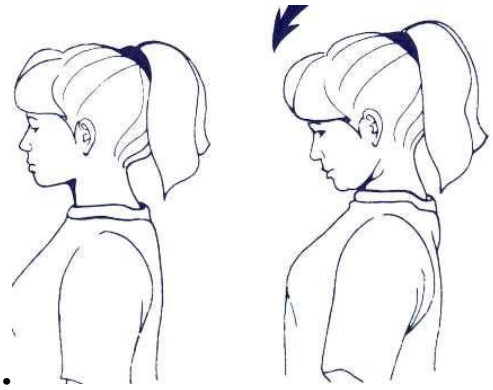
Side flexion with assistance

3.



Extension

4.

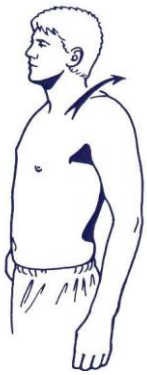


Flexion

5.

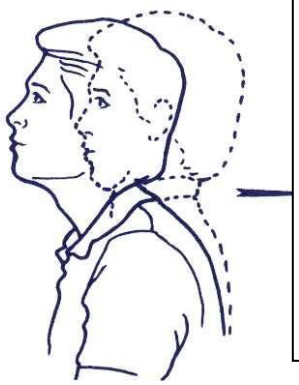
Combined stretch

Exercises 1 -5 take the head as far as possible in the desired direction without pain, hold this position for 20-30 secs during this period the pain should ease and you should keep taking the head gradually further. Repeat on opposite side if appropriate and perform two to three times daily.



Shoulder Circles

Slowly rotate the shoulders in a clockwise direction ten times making as big a circle as possible and then repeat anti-clockwise. Do this exercise two to three times per day.



Retractions

Slowly pull the head backward as if pulling away from a bad smell, hold this position for approximately 5 seconds and repeat ten times. Do this exercise at least three times per day.

What if physiotherapy does not help or resolve my condition? It is very rare that physiotherapy does not resolve this condition, in these cases a cortisone injection may be appropriate and in very extreme cases surgery is a possible option. These options can be discussed with your therapist if appropriate