

## Facet Joint Syndromes

You awaken with a “catch” in your neck. It hurts to move your neck in any direction, and you can not alleviate the discomfort. You don’t recall doing anything earlier that night or in the previous days that would cause such discomfort. What could possibly be wrong? You are likely suffering from a facet joint syndrome.

To understand the cause of a facet joint syndrome, we first must understand the anatomy involved. The neck consists of seven movable vertebrae, each with a disc-shaped shock absorber between them. Each vertebra is linked to the vertebra above and below with bony structures called facet joints. The facet joints are like drawer guides that keep the vertebrae in alignment, functioning together as a tracking mechanism. The facet joints keep the vertebrae moving smoothly without dislocation. Consisting of articular cartilage, menisci, synovial fluid, and a synovial capsule, they are similar in structure to our knees.

The articular cartilage is void of any nerve endings; however, the synovial capsule that surrounds the facet joint has plenty of nerve endings that will transmit pain signals when the synovial capsule is swollen. Typically, there is no significant trauma that causes facet-joint irritation. More often than not, it is simply caused by sleeping in a compromised position such as lying on your side on a couch with your head propped up against the armrest, sleeping while seated upright on a plane, or sleeping with an unfamiliar pillow.

A facet joint syndrome evolves in stages. It begins with a facet joint being immobile, which causes swelling. If caught early enough, the condition is easily treated with spinal manipulation. If the facet joint is left untreated and stays immobile and swollen, the neck muscles will reflexively respond by contracting on the opposite side thereby pulling your head away from the swollen facet joint. This is sometimes referred to as torticollis. Once the muscles are involved and spasms are evident, a vicious cycle begins. Normal facet-joint motion needs to be restored in order for the joint to heal. However, muscle spasms are preventing the natural movement. This leads to further facet-joint irritation, with further muscle contractions and spasms to follow. This condition self-perpetuates and can become chronic, leading to facet-joint arthritis if left untreated.

As previously mentioned, the cause of the condition is the immobile and swollen facet joint that causes the muscle to contract. The contracted muscle is not the cause of the condition. If the immobile facet joint regains natural movement through specific spinal manipulation, the muscle contraction will typically resolve without further intervention. Treatment needs to be directed at the cause not at the secondary symptoms. Many times patients have previously received care that inadequately addressed the true mechanical component of the problem. A chemical problem needs a chemical solution and a mechanical problem needs a mechanical solution. Chiropractic spinal manipulation provides a very safe and effective mechanical solution for facet joint syndromes.

If you or someone you know may be suffering from a facet joint syndrome, please contact our office. We may be able to help you.

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