Epidural Steroid Injections for Back Pain

The spinal cord is in the bony structure of the vertebral column and is covered by the dural sac. This sac contains spinal fluid that bathes and nourishes the spinal cord. The epidural space is between the outer surface of the dural sac and the bones of the vertebral column.

Nerves from the legs, including the sciatic nerve, enter the vertebral column and go through the dural sac to reach the spinal cord. These nerves can become irritated and cause pain in the legs. Pain can shoot down the leg. This is called sciatica.

With an epidural steroid injection, steroid medicine is put into the epidural space to ease the irritation of the spinal nerves to relieve pain. Also, the steroid acts like a local anesthetic and blocks the pain so the body can repair itself.

Be sure to talk to your doctor before this injection if you:
- Have any allergies
- Take a blood thinning medicine such as Coumadin
- Show any signs of an active infection, such as fever or chills
- Are pregnant or think you might be
What to Expect
You will be asked to lie flat on your stomach with a pillow under your head and one under your hips. Local anesthetic will be injected into the skin of your back at the site to be treated. When the area is numb, the needle is placed and guided by x-ray into the epidural space. The doctor injects the medicine slowly. You may feel pins and needles in the legs or get a headache. Tell the doctor if you have any of these or other feelings.

Possible Side Effects
For 12 to 24 hours after the injection, you may have pain or bruising at the site of needle insertion. If this occurs, apply an ice pack for 15 minutes every hour to help relieve the pain. Over the counter pain medicine such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen may also be helpful.

Other side effects from the injection may include:

- An increase in pain that eases again in 24 to 35 hours
- A temporary increase in pain that eases again after 24 to 36 hours.
- A headache from leakage of the spinal fluid or from injection of air into the spinal fluid. In most cases the headache goes away within a few hours but it can last for a few days. Call your doctor if the headache does not ease.
- A hot flushed feeling or a rash from a reaction to the injection. This should get better within a few hours or days.

You may have side effects from the steroid medicine. These may include:

- Weight gain
- Increase in blood sugar, especially if you have diabetes
- Water retention
- Increase risk of infection
When to Call

Call the Spine Center at (614) 293-2225 if you have:

- Any signs of infection, such as redness, swelling, fever or chills
- Low back feels tender to touch especially near the tailbone or it becomes more severe
- Changes in muscle function, such as weakness of a leg
- A severe sustained headache, unlike a common headache

Repeat Injections

If the first injection does not give you relief, you may be scheduled to try a second injection.

- Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.