



The Steward Centers for Pain Management

Frequently asked questions about trigger point injections

Trigger point injections

Trigger points are tender muscles that refer a pattern of pain to other areas of the body when palpated or touched. These tender points are usually felt as knots or bands. Trigger points can be localized to one area of the body such as the muscles that support the neck. They can also occur in multiple areas throughout the entire body.

Q. What causes trigger points?

A. Trigger points can become problematic for a number of reasons. Patients may develop trigger points because of injury to muscle tissue. Examples of muscular injury include whiplash, overuse of a muscle group, or a post viral syndrome. Trigger points may also occur because of an underlying structural problem. Spinal abnormalities such as herniated and degenerative discs, scoliosis, postural problems, and osteoarthritis are examples of conditions commonly associated with trigger points.

Q. How can one detect trigger points?

A. Trigger points are diagnosed by physical examination. The examiner palpates muscles for tender areas over taut bands and knots. X-rays, biopsies, and laboratory tests are of no use in detecting trigger points, but may be helpful in revealing an underlying condition.

Q. What is a trigger point injection?

A. A trigger point injection is an injection of a substance into a tender muscle. Examples of substances injected include local anesthetics, corticosteroids, saline solution, dextrose, and sarapin.

Q. What is the effect of injecting local anesthetics and corticosteroids?

A. Local anesthetics act to increase blood flow by dilating blood vessels to the muscle. This helps to rid the muscle of inflammatory substances that accumulate when muscles go into spasm. Corticosteroids are anti-inflammatories. These medications help to block inflammation. Inflammatory substances in the muscle produce pain by sensitizing nerve endings and receptors. In addition, the physical force of the fluid helps to break muscle spasm and adhesions.

Q. Are there anti-side effects associated with trigger point injections?

A. Trigger point injections are very safe. Patients may feel some injection site tenderness following the injection as the local anesthetic wears off. It may take a few days for the anti-inflammatory action of the steroid to take effect. Patients will sometimes feel a little dizzy for up to an hour if multiple trigger points are injected with a large dose of local anesthetic.

Q. Do trigger point injections hurt?

A. Most patients would compare the pain of trigger point injections to that of placement of an IV or blood draw.

Q. How long do the beneficial effects of trigger point injections last?

A. A definitive answer is not possible because it depends on the nature of the patient's condition. The local anesthetic will numb the area for 1-3 hours. The corticosteroids remain in the tissue in active form for about one month. The major benefit of trigger point injections is to allow the patient to more effectively participate in a rehabilitative program. Trigger point injections loosen muscle groups thereby improving patient progress in physical therapy and joint mobilization.

Q. What if trigger point injections do not help to reduce my pain?

A. If trigger point injections are not effective in reducing your pain, other modalities are available to control pain depending on your condition. These may include medical management, nerve blocks, electrical stimulation techniques, intradiscal techniques, radiofrequency, or prolotherapy.

If you have questions, be sure to ask your doctor or other member of your pain management team.

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