

Facet Dysfunction

What You Need to Know

What Is Facet Dysfunction?

Along the back of your spine, each vertebra connects to the ones above and below it through small joints called facet joints (also called zygapophyseal joints). These joints guide and limit movement in the spine, allowing you to bend, twist, and extend while keeping the vertebrae properly aligned.

Facet dysfunction — sometimes called facet syndrome or facet joint syndrome — occurs when these joints become irritated, inflamed, or restricted. This can happen suddenly from an injury or gradually from wear and tear over time. The facet joints are a very common source of back and neck pain and are often overlooked or misdiagnosed.

What Does It Feel Like?

Facet-related pain has some distinctive characteristics that help distinguish it from disc-related pain:

In the lower back:

- Aching or stiffness across the lower back, often on one or both sides
- Pain that is worse when bending backward, twisting, or standing for long periods
- Pain that tends to ease when sitting or bending forward slightly
- Referred pain into the buttocks and upper thighs (but usually not below the knee)
- Morning stiffness that improves with movement and warmth
- A "catching" or locking sensation with certain movements

In the neck:

- Stiffness and aching in the neck, especially after sleeping or sitting
- Pain that radiates into the shoulder blade or upper back
- Headaches at the base of the skull
- Difficulty rotating the head fully to one side

What Makes It Worse?

- Bending backward (extension) — this compresses the facet joints directly
- Prolonged standing or walking, especially on hard surfaces
- Twisting and rotating the spine
- Getting up from a seated position after being still
- Cold weather or inactivity
- Poor posture — slouching or an exaggerated lower back curve both stress the facets

How Did This Happen?

Facet dysfunction can develop from multiple causes:

- Acute injury — a sudden twist, fall, or whiplash event
- Gradual degeneration — the cartilage lining the facet joints wears down over time (osteoarthritis)
- Poor posture maintained over months or years
- Disc degeneration — as discs thin with age, more load transfers to the facet joints
- Repetitive extension movements in certain sports (gymnastics, swimming, golf, cricket)
- Muscle weakness or imbalance that allows excessive stress on the facet joints

How Is It Different From a Disc Problem?

While disc herniations tend to cause more pain with forward bending and sitting, facet dysfunction tends to worsen with backward bending and prolonged standing. Disc problems more commonly cause nerve-related pain (sciatica), while facet pain is usually more localized to the back and buttocks. Your physical therapist will assess your movement patterns to identify which structure is the primary source of your pain — or whether both are involved.

When Should I Be Concerned?

Seek prompt evaluation if you experience:

- New or rapidly worsening numbness or weakness in your legs or arms
- Loss of bladder or bowel control
- Severe pain following trauma (fall, accident, or impact)
- Constant, unrelenting pain that does not change with position or movement

The Good News

Facet dysfunction responds very well to physical therapy. Treatment typically includes manual therapy (joint mobilization), targeted stretching and strengthening, postural correction, and movement re-education. Many patients experience significant pain relief within just a few sessions, with lasting improvement following a complete program.

Most patients experience significant improvement within **4 to 8 weeks** of physical therapy focused on the facet joints and surrounding structures.

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