

STELLATE GANGLION INJECTION

Stellate ganglion injection is a special procedure that is used in the treatment of many conditions. Your physician may suggest this for a number of different abnormalities involving the upper extremity, neck, face or scalp. Some of the conditions that it treats include complex regional pain syndrome (reflex sympathetic dystrophy), herpes zoster (shingles) and postherpetic neuralgia among others.

The procedure is done using a local anesthetic through a very small needle into the front of the neck. It blocks a group of nerves called the “sympathetic nerves.” The injection itself usually just takes a few minutes. It is typically done under fluoroscopy (a live continuous x-ray) so that the doctor can position the needle in exactly the right place. Local anesthesia is used prior to the injection to numb-up the skin and some of the deeper tissues.

Frequently, the injections are done in a series over a number of weeks. It is hoped that with each injection good results will be additive and increase in effectiveness and duration.

The actual injection will involve lying on your back on an x-ray table with your neck extended (tilted up) over a pillow. The doctor will push on your neck next to your trachea (breathing tube). This, in combination with x-ray, will assist the doctor in positioning the needle in the correct place. After washing the neck, a small amount of local anesthesia will then be applied. Through the numb spot, the doctor will then insert a small thin needle to the area where the sympathetic nerves reside. The doctor will be primarily injecting local anesthetic. Occasionally, other additives are included with the injection. Occasionally contrast may be used to identify the area more clearly under x-ray. After the injection, the needle is immediately removed and the site bandaged. You will then be transferred to the recovery room on a gurney, where you will rest for approximately 30 minutes before discharge. Of note is that the effects of the medicine may take 20 to 45 minutes to achieve maximal changes.

The procedure is safe but there may be some side effects. Some side effects are actually expected. These are mild changes that are usually not bothersome. The predictable changes include a droopy eyelid, mild redness of the eye, nasal congestion or runny nose on the side of the injection and increased temperature of the upper extremity. Frequently, you may have a sensation where it feels difficult to swallow. It may feel like a lump in your throat. You may also experience hoarseness of your voice. All of the above side effects are predictable and only last for the duration of the local anesthetic. This is typically about one to three hours. All of these effects are fully reversible. Other side effects or risks are very uncommon and usually involve the medication going to areas outside of the intended region. With the use of x-ray guidance, this is very unusual. They may involve bleeding, infection, spinal block and injection into blood vessels and surrounding organs. It is extremely rare to have a seizure, a collapsed lung or nerve damage. You may also have some localized bruising or soreness at the site of the injection. If this is a significant problem, ice packs are usually very helpful for this.

The injection should not be done if you are on any type of blood thinner, except for one or two aspirin a day. Also, if there is any active infection near the site or anywhere in your body, the injection should be delayed. If you have a new flu, cold or uncontrolled cough, fever or very high blood pressure, the procedure should also be rescheduled. Please inform your doctor if these apply to you.

After the procedure, it is usually suggested that you try to exercise the upper extremity. It is possible that you may be feeling better temporarily from the effects of the local anesthetic. We do not expect the arm to be numb or asleep but yet the injection may block some of the pain messages. Because the injection does affect your eye on one side, we need to have someone else give you a ride home.

If you have any questions or need further details, please feel free to discuss this with your Pacific Pain Medicine provider prior to the procedure.