



Can Epidural Injections Help Back Pain?

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Epidural for Back Pain

My husband has debilitating lower back pain. It took him a while to get a diagnosis – as we all know, insurance requires our physicians to jump through hoops to order diagnostic tests.

Eventually, he had an MRI that confirmed a herniation in a vertebra at the lumbar level, and he was quickly referred to a neurosurgeon.

It was bad enough where an “easy” surgery wasn’t indicated, but not bad enough that he couldn’t put the surgery off until he was ready.

He needed to have a fusion of the spine to fix it, but he could “deal” with the pain until he couldn’t anymore, because as we learned, one fusion surgery inevitably leads to another, especially when you’re dealing with the lower spine.

One thing that was offered? Injections to “fix” the pain.

It did manage his pain, temporarily. He would get the injections every several months and feel pretty dang good.

However, he also noticed that his legs were weak when he got the injections – not a good feeling for a 30-something guy who is active in running, skiing, snowboarding, and softball.

So, he looked for answers.

The Pros

As my husband found out, the injections can be highly effective at reducing pain. They helped him live a more normal life – until the next injection.

The injections are given by a highly trained physician, typically a radiologist. It is typically cortisone, a steroid that is known to reduce inflammation.

Although some institutions have specific rules for how many injections can be given per the calendar year (or at all), research indicates that there is no upper limit to this number.

There are also other types of injections that can be given to reduce pain, such as trigger point injections and facet injections.

These injections may use just a local anesthetic or a local anesthetic in conjunction with a steroid. They may be equally effective if used with a steroid, but likely won’t work for a long duration if used just as a local anesthetic.

Some people like injections for pain control because it means a reduction in taking oral pain medications, which can have a laundry list of side effects, especially if they have other comorbid conditions such as liver or kidney conditions.

The Cons

Cortisone may reduce inflammation. However, it is so potent that it can weaken tendons and break down and soften cartilage.

What does this mean for the long-term?

This may not be a big deal for people who are not surgical candidates, but for someone like my husband, it may mean that his musculature, his cartilage, and tendons may be too weak to hold up after the surgery, rendering the surgery ineffective.

It is also a widely known fact that steroids can increase blood sugar levels.

For some people with diabetes, an injection of cortisone does not increase blood sugar levels or only does so temporarily and for others, the cortisone injection wreaks havoc on blood sugar levels for days and even weeks afterward.

The Bottom Line...

There is no right or wrong answer as to if you should get spinal injections for back pain. They are highly effective and can be an excellent way to treat pain.

Always weigh the pros and cons, and your goals for further surgical options.