

Most Common Epidural Questions

Why do I need an Epidural Steroid Injection (ESI)?

If you are scheduled for an ESI, then you are most likely experiencing neck, mid or lower back pain with possible referral into the shoulders, arms, hips or legs. The most likely cause for these symptoms is inflammation in your spine that can cause localized pain in the back as well as nerve referred pain into the extremities.

If the typical treatments of rest, medications and physical therapy have been unsuccessful in removing your symptoms, then there is a very good chance that a steroid could dramatically improve your pain. In order to avoid all the side effects of high dose oral steroids, a small amount of steroid can be placed precisely into the location of the irritation and inflammation within the epidural space. The epidural space is a thin space that covers the entire spine and provides a buffer of protection between the spinal nerves and the bony vertebral column.

By eliminating the inflammation at the site of injury, there is a high likelihood of long-lasting relief that can prevent or post-pone the need for surgery. Epidural steroid injections are commonly used to treat a variety of spinal conditions including degenerative disc disease, disc bulges, herniations, or spinal stenosis caused by arthritis and spurring.

How Long Can an Epidural Steroid Injection Last?

In cases where the nerve is only inflamed and not actually compressed or “pinched”, a single epidural could give relief up to several years. However, the average length of benefit gained after a single injection is somewhere between 3 and 6 months. Although patients often report relief up to one year, this occurs in less than 1/3 of patients. When the relief is partial or temporary, only giving just a few weeks of relief, the epidural can be repeated as soon as 2 weeks after the first injection for a “booster” effect. If the first 2 epidurals have failed to provide any significant relief, it is rare that a 3rd epidural would show much difference. At this time, another type of injection or surgical options may need to be discussed.

When Should I start Feeling Better After My Epidural Steroid Injection?

Most epidural steroid injections are given with some local 1% lidocaine which usually provides some initial pain relief for a few hours on the day of the procedure. In most cases, it takes about 2 to 3 days for the steroid to begin healing the inflamed area inside the spine. Prior to the onset of relief, a small percent of patients can have an increase in their pain for up to 3 days. This is usually related to either pressure of the medicine within the inflamed epidural space or compensatory muscle spasm in the back. It may be necessary to continue your current pain medication and muscle relaxant for the first few days following the procedure. However, the point of the procedure is to heal the affected area and therefore eliminate the need for pain medications all together.

Note: We do not routinely provide pain prescriptions on the day of the procedure, and prefer to keep all prescriptions handled through our main Alabama Orthopaedic Center office. Call our office number for all prescription medications.