

Joint Aspiration

WHAT IS A JOINT ASPIRATION?

A joint aspiration, or arthrocentesis, is a procedure whereby a sterile needle and syringe are used to drain fluid from the joint.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF JOINT ASPIRATION?

Joint aspiration is used to obtain joint fluid for examination in the laboratory. Analysis of joint fluid can help to define causes of joint swelling or arthritis, such as infection, gout, and rheumatoid disease. Joint fluid can also be cultured for infection.

Joint aspiration can also be helpful in relieving joint swelling and pain. Removal of joint fluid that is inflamed can also remove the white blood cells within that are sources of enzymes that can be destructive to the joint. Occasionally, cortisone medications are injected into the joint during the joint aspiration in order to rapidly relieve joint inflammation and further reduce symptoms.

HOW IS THE PROCEDURE DONE?

The patient will be asked to lie flat on an x-ray table on their back. The skin over the joint is cleansed with antiseptic soap. The skin is then numbed with lidocaine (a "local" anesthetic). Using fluoroscopy (live x-ray) for guidance, the physician directs a needle toward the joint space. The physician will try to aspirate fluid from the joint using a syringe. If fluid cannot be obtained, then some sterile saline (salt water) will be injected into the joint to try to "wash out" any infection. A small amount of contrast (dye) will be injected into the joint to verify that the needle is in the correct position. A joint injection usually takes between 10 and 20 minutes. The patient will be observed for approximately 20 minutes after the procedure.

WHAT ARE THE MEDICATIONS USED?

- Contrast ("dye")
- Iodine Soap (skin cleanser)
- Lidocaine (local anesthetic)
- Sterile Saline (salt water)

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WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT DURING THE PROCEDURE?

Most often, the stinging/burning of the numbing medicine is the most uncomfortable part of the procedure. You may have some cramping or pressure as the fluid is aspirated or when the sterile saline is injected.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS INVOLVED WITH A JOINT ASPIRATION?

Risks include bleeding, infection and allergic reaction to the medication. The patient may have increased pain for a few days after the injection.

HOW WILL I FEEL AFTER THE PROCEDURE?

After the procedure, you may have pressure or pain in the joint. These reactions should be relieved within several hours after the procedure. If you experience pain, you may apply an ice pack and take a non-aspirin pain reliever to help your symptoms. You should not participate in any exercise activities for 24 hours after the procedure. When large amounts of fluid are removed from the joint, the patient may feel pain-relief.

FOR WHAT REASONS SHOULD THE PATIENT CALL THE RADIOLOGIST AFTER THE ASPIRATION?

If the patient experience severe pain, new numbness or weakness in the area injected, or signs of infection in the area of the injection, the patient should call right away at (804) 560-8906.

For More Information

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your procedure, please call the VCU Health Department of Radiology at (804) 237-6619.