

Joint injections

What are joint injections?

Joint injections put steroid medication directly into a joint using a needle. They are also called intra-articular injections.

Why are joint injections used?

Joint injections are used to help people who have arthritis or inflammation of their joints.

The steroid medication is placed right inside the inflamed joint, where it acts quickly to reduce inflammation. Steroid joint injections do not cause the same side effects that occur when steroids are taken by mouth or injected into the bloodstream.

Joint pain and swelling may improve within days of the injection. These symptoms often remain better for months or even longer.

What medications are used for joint injections?

Aristospan[®] (triamcinolone hexacetonide) is the steroid medication used most often for joint injections in children and teens. Aristospan[®] starts working earlier, has longer-lasting effects, and has fewer side effects than other steroids. In Ontario, doctors need to apply for special approval from the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to get this medication.

Other steroids, such as Kenalog[®] (triamcinolone acetonide), may also be injected into joints.

How are joint injections done?

A doctor will inject the steroid medication into the joint. This is often done by a pediatric rheumatologist in a clinic or a special procedure room. Some joints, like the jaw joint, need to be injected by radiologists with the help of ultrasound or X-rays.

The doctor may use an anesthetic cream to numb the skin before the injection. Young children may need a sedative or general anesthesia to help them relax and stay still during the procedure.

What side effects are possible with joint injections?

- Joint infection is a rare but serious side effect. Infection is rare because the injection is done using sterile (germ-free) techniques.
- Thinning or changes in the colour of skin at the injection site may develop over time.
- Tiny calcium deposits may be seen on an X-ray of a joint that was injected. These deposits do not cause pain or affect the movement of a joint.
- A small number of people may have more swelling of the joint after the injection. This will go away after a few days.

Instructions after joint injections

After injections, the joint needs to rest as much as possible for the next 24 hours. If joints in the legs were injected, walking should be avoided, except for going to the bathroom.

There may be mild joint pain in the 24 hours after a joint injection. It is safe to use Tylenol[®] (acetaminophen) to relieve pain. The pain should be better within several hours.

See a doctor right away for any of these signs of infection in the first 48 hours after the injection:

- Fever, a temperature above 38°C (100.4°F)
- Feeling unwell
- Severe pain, redness, swelling and/or heat in the injected joint