



# Are epidural steroid injections for low back pain a failure?

By Michael H. Weier • March 12, 2015

Epidural steroid injections (ESIs) are routinely touted as a common, minimally invasive, and effective treatment for low back and radiating leg pain.<sup>1</sup> Though typically safe, steroid injections are not without risk. Anxiety, nausea, restlessness, high blood pressure, and potential infection, including fungal meningitis, are reported potential side effects of lumbar spine steroid injections.<sup>2</sup>

Physicians routinely perform ESIs for patients suffering from lumbar spinal stenosis, disc herniations, and other spinal conditions. An ESI is an injection of a mixture of a steroid anti-inflammatory and a local anesthetic into the epidural space encasing the spinal cord and nerves. The anesthetic provides short-term pain relief; the steroid anti-inflammatory purportedly alleviates discomfort for a longer period of time.

A recent study reported by the Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery indicates ESIs with a steroid-anesthetic mixture provide no greater relief than injections with local anesthetic alone.<sup>3</sup> The researchers conducted a randomized, double-blind study of 400 patients with lumbar spinal stenosis. One set of 200 patients received injections of glucocorticoid (the steroid anti-inflammatory) and lidocaine (the local anesthetic), while another 200 patients received injections of lidocaine alone. The results revealed no significant difference. Patients injected with a steroid-anesthetic mixture had no greater improvements in pain-related functional disability or reported pain intensity than patients injected with anesthetic alone. The anticipated longer-term relief with use of the steroid did not occur.

Additional research is needed to corroborate the study results; however, lack of symptomatic improvement gives pause to consider whether EPs for low back pain are worth the potential risks. ■

***Test patients who received injections with or without a steroid anti-inflammatory showed no differences in relief***

<sup>1</sup> Baker, Ray, *Epidural Steroid Injections*, KnowYourBack.Org, North American Spine Society (see web site: [http://www.knowyourback.org/Pages/Treatments/InjectionTreatments/ES\\_Injections.aspx](http://www.knowyourback.org/Pages/Treatments/InjectionTreatments/ES_Injections.aspx), July 17, 2009);

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## ARE EPIDURAL STEROID INJECTIONS A FAILURE? (continued)

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<sup>2</sup> Tests and Procedures: Cortisone Shots, 13 Aug 2013 (see web site: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/cortisone-shots/basics/risks/prc-20014455>);

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<sup>3</sup> Kepler, Christopher, et al., *Epidural Injections with Glucocorticoid and Lidocaine for Spinal Stenosis Did Not Confer Additional Benefits Compared with Lidocaine Alone*, *J Bone Joint Surg Am* 2015; 97:342, 18 Feb 2015 (see web site: <http://jbjournals.org/content/97/4/342>)

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