



The Sacroiliac Joint and Motor Vehicle Accidents: The Role of Regenerative Medicine Interventions

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Purpose Statement

This white paper will examine the sacroiliac joint and its role as a pain generator in the context of motor vehicle accidents and whiplash associated disorder. Treatment of the pain and dysfunction associated with these conditions by platelet rich plasma and amniotic allograft products as well as the effectiveness based on research will be discussed in detail.

Executive Summary

The sacroiliac joint SIJ is a well-recognized source of lower back and pelvic pain particularly in the setting of Motor Vehicle Accidents MVA and Whiplash Associated Disorder WAD. Its unique anatomy and biomechanical role in load transfer make it susceptible to injury contributing to pain generation and functional impairment.

Orthobiologic interventions including platelet-rich plasma PRP and amniotic allograft AA products represent evolving regenerative therapies with growing evidence supporting improvements in pain and function in select patient populations. Clinical application of both conventional and regenerative approaches in our practice is consistent with outcomes reported in the literature.

Key Findings

The SIJ is a complex load-bearing structure and a common contributor to lower back and pelvic pain

- Stability is maintained through both structural form closure and dynamic force closure mechanisms involving bone ligaments and musculature
- MVA can generate multidirectional forces capable of disrupting SIJ integrity and associated soft tissues
- Physical examination maneuvers can aid diagnosis however image-guided diagnostic injections remain the gold standard for confirming SIJ-mediated pain
- PRP is an autologous regenerative therapy utilizing concentrated platelets from the patient's own blood to support tissue repair reduce pain and improve function
- AA products are biologic therapies derived from amniotic and umbilical tissues formulated to promote healing and modulate inflammation
- Both PRP and AA deliver growth factors and cytokines that enhance healing responses particularly in cases of trauma poor vascularity or compromised host factors
- These therapies may promote cellular signaling and recruitment of progenitor cells supporting tissue remodeling in ligamentous tendinous and facet-related pathology
- Clinical studies demonstrate improvements in pain and functional outcomes when orthobiologics are appropriately applied to SIJ-related conditions
- Early targeted intervention in appropriate patients may improve outcomes and reduce progression to chronic pain states.

Implications

PRP and AA therapies represent viable adjuncts for patients with SIJ-mediated pain who have plateaued with conventional care. When applied in appropriately selected patients and guided by objective findings these interventions may improve clinical outcomes and help mitigate long-term disability.

From a medico-legal perspective referral to providers experienced in both diagnostic confirmation and regenerative treatment of SIJ pathology is recommended to ensure appropriate care pathways and documentation.

Introduction

The sacroiliac joint SIJ is a biomechanically complex structure located inferior to the lumbar spine exhibiting both synovial and syndesmotic characteristics with hyaline cartilage fibrocartilage and a supporting fibrous capsule.¹⁻³ Anatomical variation within the SIJ may predispose certain regions to increased mechanical stress.⁴⁻⁵

Functionally the SIJ plays a critical role in transferring ground reaction forces from the lower extremities to the axial skeleton through an integrated system of ligamentous and muscular attachments.³ This combination of structural complexity and biomechanical demand contributes to its recognized role as a generator of lower back pain.¹

Pelvic Girdle Pain PGP as defined by European guidelines encompasses pain localized between the posterior iliac crest and gluteal fold often associated with SIJ dysfunction and functional limitations in standing walking and sitting.¹¹

WAD represents a spectrum of injury following MVA encompassing not only spinal pain but also neurological vestibular and psychological symptoms.¹²⁻²⁷ These injuries frequently involve multiple regions including the SIJ and its supporting structures.

Epidemiologic data suggest that the SIJ contributes to approximately 10-30% of lower back pain cases with higher prevalence reported in post-traumatic populations.¹⁻²⁸⁻²⁹ DePalma et al. identified SIJ pathology in 26% of patients with MVA-related lower back pain.³⁰

Biomechanically SIJ stability is achieved through two primary mechanisms.

Form closure defined as passive stability from joint congruency and ligamentous support.³⁴⁻³⁵

Force closure defined as dynamic stabilization via musculoligamentous systems.³⁴

Key muscular systems include the longitudinal sling posterior oblique sling and anterior oblique sling which coordinate load transfer across the pelvis.²⁸ Additional contributions arise from the pelvic floor diaphragm and transverse abdominis enhancing stability and intra-abdominal pressure regulation.³⁴⁻³⁶

Ligamentous structures including the sacroiliac sacrotuberous sacrospinous interosseous and iliolumbar ligaments play a critical role in limiting excessive motion and maintaining joint integrity.³⁻³⁴⁻³⁵⁻³⁷

A key functional movement sacral nutation optimizes load transfer and ligament tension during weight-bearing activities.³⁴⁻³⁸⁻³⁹ Disruption of these coordinated systems during trauma such as MVA can result in pain instability and functional impairment of the SIJ.

Mechanics of Sacroiliac Joint Injury in Motor Vehicle Accidents

Following an MVA the SIJ and associated structures are exposed to forces sufficient to produce injury.³⁰⁻³² These forces may be directionally specific. In frontal or rear-end collisions the lower extremities are often braced against the vehicle which transmits ground reaction forces proximally into the pelvis.⁴⁰⁻⁴² This loading can produce rapid shear or posterior tilt of the innominate and drive the sacrum into nutation while the lumbar spine transitions into extension.⁴³⁻⁴⁴

Driving posture typically places the lumbosacral spine in a relatively flexed position with increased tension on posterior structures and compression anteriorly.⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶ This position correlates with sacral counternutation which places increased strain on the dorsal and interosseous SIJ ligaments and represents a mechanically less stable state.³⁻³⁴⁻³⁶⁻⁴²⁻⁴⁷⁻⁴⁸

At impact the pelvis accelerates forward while the spine initially extends followed by a rebound flexion phase.⁴⁵ This sequence generates combined tensile compressive and shear forces across the lumbosacral region. The anterior spinal column undergoes a traction to compression transition while posterior soft tissues are subjected to tensile loading.³⁴⁻⁴⁵⁻⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰ These combined forces are poorly tolerated by the SIJ and have been associated with injury to both intraarticular and extraarticular structures.³⁻⁴³⁻⁵¹⁻⁵⁴ As described by Vleeming et al disturbed or excessive force transfer through the SIJ can result in abnormal compressive or torsional stresses with deleterious tissue effects.³⁴

In lateral impact collisions additional side bending and rotational forces are introduced.⁵⁵⁻⁵⁷ The body undergoes an initial inertial movement followed by lateral bending toward the impacted side which creates tension on contralateral tissues and compression and shear on ipsilateral structures.⁵⁵⁻⁵⁸ These forces may be amplified by contact with the vehicle interior and further increase stress on the SIJ and surrounding tissues.

In real-world MVAs forces are often multidirectional rather than isolated to a single plane.⁵⁸ This results in complex loading patterns across the SIJ with combined vectors that can exceed physiologic tolerance and contribute to ligamentous and joint injury.⁵¹⁻⁵⁹⁻⁶⁰

Pathophysiology of Sacroiliac Joint Injury

Traumatic loading of the SIJ can result in injury to capsular ligamentous and periarticular structures as well as activation of an inflammatory response. Collagen fiber disruption within SIJ ligaments has been demonstrated in patients with SIJ-mediated pain.² Both intraarticular and extraarticular structures may serve as pain generators given the presence of nociceptive fibers within capsuloligamentous tissues.³⁻⁶¹⁻⁶⁵

This distribution of pain-sensitive structures may contribute to variability in diagnostic block responses and supports the need to evaluate both intraarticular and extraarticular sources when SIJ pathology is suspected.⁶⁶⁻⁶⁷

The inflammatory response following injury is part of normal tissue repair however excessive or prolonged inflammation may contribute to persistent pain states.⁶⁸⁻⁷¹ Elevated cytokine activity has been associated with both pain signaling and degenerative changes within the axial skeleton.⁷²⁻⁷³ Pathological changes at the SIJ may include inflammatory cell infiltration cartilage degeneration subchondral bone disruption synovitis and enthesitis.¹⁰⁻⁷⁴

Persistent inflammatory signaling may also contribute to peripheral and central sensitization leading to amplification of pain responses.⁷⁵⁻⁷⁶ This mechanism is well supported in the literature with neuroimmune processes playing a central role in chronic pain development.⁷⁷

Certain populations may be at increased risk for SIJ pathology. Patients with prior lumbar fusion may experience altered force distribution resulting in increased stress transfer to the SIJ.⁷⁸⁻⁷⁹ Additionally females have been shown to have a higher prevalence of SIJ-related pain which may be related to anatomical and biomechanical differences.⁸⁰⁻⁸²

Diagnosis of Sacroiliac Joint Pathology

Accurate diagnosis of SIJ-mediated pain requires correlation of symptom location physical examination and confirmatory testing. Pain localized to the region inferomedial to the posterior superior iliac spine identified during provocation testing Fortin Finger Test has been described as characteristic of SIJ pathology.³³⁻⁸³⁻⁸⁴

Provocative testing clusters including thigh thrust Patrick test distraction compression sacral thrust and Gaenslen tests have demonstrated clinical utility when at least three tests reproduce the patient's familiar pain.⁸⁵⁻⁸⁷ Variability in examination technique and training may influence diagnostic accuracy.⁸⁶⁻⁹¹

Due to these limitations diagnostic SIJ blocks remain the most reliable method for confirming intraarticular SIJ pain.⁹² Image-guided injections using fluoroscopy or CT are recommended to ensure accuracy as non-guided injections have demonstrated poor reliability.⁹⁶⁻⁹⁸

Evidence supports the use of single or dual diagnostic blocks to confirm SIJ as a pain generator.²⁹⁻⁹²⁻⁹⁵ Systematic reviews have demonstrated good evidence for controlled anesthetic blocks in diagnosing SIJ-mediated pain.⁶⁶

In cases of diagnostic uncertainty advanced imaging such as MRI may be utilized to identify structural pathology not visible on standard radiographs.⁹⁹

The Basic Science of Platelet-Rich Plasma PRP and Amniotic Allografts

Platelet-Rich Plasma PRP is an autologous concentration of platelets derived from the patient and processed to supraphysiologic levels to support tissue repair reduce pain and improve function¹⁰⁰⁻¹⁰² PRP has demonstrated efficacy across multiple musculoskeletal conditions including knee osteoarthritis carpal tunnel syndrome lateral epicondylitis rotator cuff pathology and lower back pain.¹⁰²⁻¹⁰⁷

PRP is produced by drawing a defined volume of venous blood and centrifuging it to isolate a plasma fraction with elevated platelet concentration.¹⁰¹ Normal platelet counts range from 150,000 to 450,000 per microliter whereas PRP is typically defined as 3-5 times baseline concentration.¹⁰¹⁻¹⁰⁸ Several formulations exist including leukocyte-rich PRP, leukocyte-poor PRP, platelet-poor plasma, platelet-rich fibrin, and platelet lysate, each with condition-specific applications.¹⁰⁹⁻¹¹²

The therapeutic effects of PRP are driven by the release of growth factors and bioactive proteins that initiate and support the healing cascade.¹¹³ These include vascular endothelial growth factor, epidermal growth factor, hepatocyte growth factor, platelet-derived growth factor, tumor necrosis factor alpha, and transforming growth factor beta 1, which collectively promote angiogenesis, cellular proliferation, and tissue regeneration.¹¹³⁻¹¹⁷

Platelet activation also facilitates recruitment and signaling of progenitor cells which migrate to sites of injury and contribute to tissue remodeling.¹¹³⁻¹¹⁶ These cells may differentiate into tendon, cartilage, muscle, nerve, and bone tissue, supporting structural and functional recovery.¹¹⁸⁻¹²²

Amniotic Allografts (AA) are regenerative biologic therapies derived from human amniotic membrane, fluid, umbilical cord tissue, and/or blood, and are used in regenerative orthopedics.¹²³ These products may be processed into injectable formulations or surgical grafts while preserving growth factors, cytokines, extracellular matrix components, and antimicrobial peptides.¹²³⁻¹²⁴

AA products function through similar biologic pathways as PRP, including modulation of inflammation, enhancement of tissue repair, and promotion of cellular signaling.¹²³ Research supports their role in recruiting progenitor cells and facilitating healing responses in injured tissues.¹²⁵⁻¹²⁸

AA products demonstrate low immunogenicity due to reduced expression of human leukocyte antigens, which minimizes immune recognition while also modulating local immune responses at the treatment site.¹²⁹⁻¹³⁰ These properties allow for safe application across a range of conditions, including osteoarthritis, tendinopathies, degenerative spinal conditions, cartilage defects, and radiculopathy.¹³¹⁻¹³⁹

Both PRP and AA have demonstrated clinical utility in patients who have not responded to conventional conservative care. Their use represents a logical progression in treatment when standard therapies such as physical therapy, medications, or corticosteroid injections fail to provide adequate relief.

From a practical standpoint, treatment selection should consider patient-specific factors. PRP requires venipuncture and on-site processing, which may take 30-60 minutes and may be influenced by patient health factors that affect platelet quality.¹⁰¹⁻¹⁴⁰⁻¹⁴² In contrast, AA products are readily available without the need for blood draw or processing and may be preferable in patients with poor biologic substrate, procedural limitations, or time constraints.

Both therapies offer meaningful potential to improve pain and function; however, optimal outcomes depend on appropriate patient selection, clinical judgment, and alignment of treatment approach with patient-specific needs.

Evidence for PRP or AA Use in the Sacroiliac Joint Complex

Current literature consistently demonstrates that orthobiologic interventions such as PRP provide more durable improvements in pain and function compared to corticosteroid injections. Corticosteroids remain effective for short-term symptom relief but are not recommended as a stand-alone long-term solution due to potential adverse effects and risk of tissue degeneration.¹⁴³

Multiple case series and clinical studies involving complex SIJ pain populations, including trauma, MVA, postpartum conditions, and prior lumbar fusion, have demonstrated meaningful improvements in pain and function following PRP treatment.¹⁴⁴⁻¹⁴⁹ These improvements are typically observed within 3 to 6 months and are often sustained at follow-up intervals ranging from 6 months to 4 years. Image guidance using ultrasound or fluoroscopy was consistently utilized to optimize accuracy and safety.¹⁴⁶

Prospective and single-arm trials further support these findings. One study evaluating ultrasound-guided PRP injections into the SIJ demonstrated progressive improvement in pain and function sustained at 6 months.¹⁵⁰ Similar improvements were reported at 1 and 3 months in a more recent trial.¹⁵¹

Comparative studies have consistently shown superior long-term outcomes with PRP relative to corticosteroids. In a 2017 study by Singla et al outcomes at 6 weeks and 3 months favored PRP with reported efficacy of 90 percent in the PRP group compared to 25 percent in the corticosteroid group.¹⁵² Another trial comparing fluoroscopy-guided injections found corticosteroids provided greater short-term benefit at 4 weeks whereas PRP demonstrated superior outcomes by 8 weeks including improvements in imaging findings.¹⁵³ Additional comparative trials involving a combined total of 187 patients have demonstrated similar trends with greater long-term improvements in pain and disability favoring PRP.¹⁵⁴⁻¹⁵⁶

A randomized controlled trial in 2022 evaluated PRP combined with prolotherapy targeting ligamentous structures around the SIJ.¹⁵⁷ This study demonstrated improved outcomes at 6 months and highlighted the importance of addressing both intraarticular and extraarticular pain generators.¹⁵⁷⁻¹⁵⁸ Additional studies have supported the role of extraarticular structures in SIJ pain and demonstrated positive outcomes when these tissues are targeted with PRP.¹⁵⁹⁻¹⁶¹

Systematic reviews further reinforce these findings. Reviews published in 2020 and 2021 reported clinically meaningful improvements in SIJ-related pain with PRP including up to 90 percent of patients achieving at least 50 percent symptom reduction at 12 months.¹⁶²⁻¹⁶³ More recent analyses in 2024 have confirmed a positive association between PRP use and improvements in pain and disability with evidence suggesting superiority over corticosteroid injections in long-term outcomes.¹⁶⁴

These consistent findings have led to inclusion of PRP in current best practice guidelines which recommend consideration of PRP when conservative treatments fail or are contraindicated.⁹⁵

With respect to AA products emerging evidence supports their use in SIJ-related pain. A multicenter retrospective study evaluating 38 patients with persistent SIJ dysfunction who failed conservative care demonstrated meaningful improvements in pain and function at 90 days following treatment.¹⁶⁵ Reported outcomes included a 42 percent reduction in pain scores and a 22 percent improvement in functional measures.¹⁶⁵

Although the volume of evidence for AA is currently less robust than for PRP the underlying biologic mechanisms are similar including modulation of inflammation and support of tissue repair. When patient-specific factors such as overall health tolerance for blood draw or time constraints are considered AA may represent an appropriate and effective alternative.

Early Intervention to Prevent Chronic Pain

In patients presenting with acute pain following MVA and WAD early management should prioritize prevention of progression to chronic pain. Secondary prevention strategies focused on early identification and targeted treatment of acute or subacute pain can significantly improve outcomes and reduce long-term disability.¹⁶⁶ The primary objective is to prevent central sensitization even in the presence of peripheral sensitization.¹⁶⁶⁻¹⁶⁸

Central sensitization refers to amplification of nociceptive signaling within the central nervous system resulting in heightened pain perception and reduced thresholds for pain.¹⁶⁹ Peripheral sensitization involves increased responsiveness of nociceptive pathways at the site of injury leading to amplified signaling to the central nervous system.¹⁷⁰ Both processes contribute to the development and persistence of chronic pain and are commonly observed in WAD populations where they are associated with reduced quality of life.¹⁷¹⁻¹⁷⁴

Importantly these processes may be mitigated or reversed when peripheral pain generators are effectively treated. Studies have demonstrated that normalization of nociceptive input from injured tissues can reduce central sensitization and improve functional outcomes.¹⁷⁵⁻¹⁷⁹ Early intervention targeting the inflammatory response associated with WAD has been shown to reduce progression to chronic pain and decrease the likelihood of more invasive treatments.¹⁸⁰⁻¹⁸³

In this context early use of targeted interventions including injections should be considered to control inflammation reduce pain and improve function. These approaches may provide short-term symptom relief while facilitating progression to longer-term regenerative strategies such as PRP or AA which have demonstrated sustained benefits.

Psychological factors also play a significant role in chronic pain development. Variables such as kinesiophobia anxiety depression post-traumatic stress disorder and negative recovery expectations are associated with poorer outcomes following MVA.¹⁸⁴⁻¹⁹¹ Early psychological response within the first 3 weeks has been shown to predict long-term pain severity.¹⁹² Effective pain control has been associated with improvement in these psychological factors further supporting early intervention.¹⁹³⁻¹⁹⁴

Early identification of high-risk patients combined with targeted medical management is essential to prevent transition to chronic pain and should be a central component of clinical decision making in WAD-related conditions.

Real World Application

Clinical evidence supports a multimodal approach to managing SIJ-related pain following MVA. Patients frequently present in a pro-inflammatory state with high levels of pain and functional limitation.¹⁹⁵⁻¹⁹⁷ While active rehabilitation is critical for recovery pain often limits participation in physical therapy and delays return to normal function.¹⁹⁸⁻²⁰⁰

Strategic use of corticosteroid injections in the acute to early subacute phase can reduce pain sufficiently to allow participation in rehabilitation and provide insight into treatment response. As noted in the literature early effective pain management is critical in reducing progression to chronicity.²⁰¹

However many patients continue to experience persistent symptoms despite corticosteroid use.²⁰¹⁻²⁰² To improve long-term outcomes evidence supports transitioning from corticosteroid-based management to regenerative approaches. An early corticosteroid injection followed by PRP or AA intervention within an appropriate time frame may optimize the healing environment and improve long-term recovery.¹⁸²

This approach aligns with evidence demonstrating superior long-term outcomes with orthobiologic therapies and the potential detrimental effects of repeated corticosteroid exposure on joint structures.¹⁴³⁻²⁰³⁻²⁰⁴

PRP and AA therapies provide concentrated biologic signaling that supports tissue repair and reduces pain allowing greater participation in rehabilitation and improved functional outcomes. When integrated into a structured treatment pathway these interventions offer a practical and evidence-based strategy to improve recovery and reduce chronic disability in patients with SIJ-related pain following WAD.

Clinical Implications and Future Directions

Management of SIJ pain associated with WAD remains challenging with standard care alone often yielding suboptimal long-term outcomes. Evidence indicates that approximately 50 percent of patients recover within 3 to 6 months while a substantial proportion continue to experience symptoms for 1 to 2 years or longer. Among those with persistent symptoms 30 to 40 percent report ongoing mild to moderate pain and 10 to 20 percent develop moderate to severe chronic pain syndromes.²⁰¹

Given these outcomes there is a clear need for more effective treatment strategies. Emerging evidence supports the integration of orthobiologic therapies such as PRP and AA into a multimodal care model. When combined with appropriate pain management and structured physical therapy these interventions may improve pain control enhance functional recovery and alter the trajectory toward chronic disability.

Clinical experience within this organization has demonstrated consistent improvements in pain and function when early targeted interventions are followed by regenerative treatments directed at the SIJ and associated soft tissues. This approach emphasizes early symptom control restoration of mobility and progressive strengthening to return patients to baseline function.

Future research including retrospective analyses and randomized controlled trials is warranted to further validate these findings and support broader adoption of this treatment paradigm. Ongoing efforts are focused on publishing outcomes associated with this multimodal approach to contribute to the evolving standard of care.

Conclusion

SIJ pathology in the setting of WAD presents a complex clinical challenge with a high risk of persistent pain and disability. Traditional care pathways alone may not sufficiently address the underlying mechanisms driving chronicity.

Evidence and clinical experience support the use of orthobiologic interventions such as PRP and AA following initial pain management to improve long-term outcomes. These therapies offer a pathway toward enhanced recovery by addressing both the biologic and functional components of injury.

Adoption of a structured multimodal approach that integrates early intervention regenerative therapies and rehabilitation may significantly improve patient outcomes and reduce long-term disability in this population.

Next Steps

For attorneys and healthcare teams managing patients with WAD and SIJ-related pain a clear understanding of evidence-based treatment pathways is essential. The principles outlined in this document support a structured approach to care that emphasizes early intervention accurate diagnosis and progression to regenerative therapies when appropriate.

PRP and AA interventions have demonstrated the potential to improve pain and function and to reduce the likelihood of chronic pain when incorporated into a comprehensive treatment plan. Referral to providers experienced in these techniques may improve both clinical outcomes and the overall strength of medico-legal documentation.

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