

## **Facet Joint Radiofrequency Ablation**

### **What is facet joint radiofrequency ablation?**

Facet joints are small joints in the rear portion of the spine that may cause pain in some patients. The pain is usually centrally located in the back or neck and usually does not radiate much to any part of the body.

Radiofrequency nerve ablation is a procedure that can be used in patients to block pain originating at facet joints. A special machine creates the radiofrequency energy that produces heat through the tip of a special type of needle. This heat can be focused in a very small area to treat the nerve tissue, so that the nerve will no longer transmit pain impulses.

### **Who should undergo facet joint radiofrequency ablation?**

Candidates for radiofrequency nerve ablation typically have had two facet joint blocks with different types of anesthetics (numbing medicines) prior to radiofrequency. This helps determine whether or not the nerves supplying the facet joints are causing the patient's symptoms.

### **What can I expect during the procedure?**

If necessary, a nurse trained in conscious sedation will give you intravenous medication to help you stay relaxed, decrease your pain, and make you comfortable. The nurse will monitor your vital signs during the procedure. You will need to remain conscious and answer questions during the procedure for safety purposes.

You will lie on your stomach or side on a fluoroscopy (x-ray) table or CT scanner. The area around the painful site will be cleansed with an antiseptic to decrease the chance of infection. The skin will be numbed with a local anesthetic. Next, using fluoroscopic (x-ray) or CT guidance, a special electrode needle will be passed through the skin and placed next to each small nerve sending pain impulses from the facet joint (there are two nerves per joint). The position of the needle must be very exact. The electrode will then be tested to make sure it is not near any important motor or sensory nerves. When it is safe to do so, the radiofrequency energy will be delivered to the nerves for approximately 90 each, ablating them.

The entire procedure takes about 90 minutes per level treated.

### **Does the procedure hurt?**

Radiofrequency treatment should be fairly painless, as the area to be treated will first be anesthetized (numbed) with local numbing medicine.

During the procedure, there may be a sense of muscle twitching in the back or neck when the needle is in the proper place. If you feel any twitching in the legs or arms, you must tell the physician.

### **What are the risks of the procedure?**

Complications that may occur during these procedures include: temporary increased pain after the procedure, nerve or spinal cord injury (rare), and skin numbness. Infrequently, treatment of high neck facet joints may lead to dizziness.

With thoracic facet injections only, there is a risk of a pneumothorax (the lung is punctured by the needle and partially collapses). This complication is **extremely** rare; inserting a tube in the chest can treat a pneumothorax, if necessary.

Bleeding and infection are risks of any invasive procedure. Tell your doctor if you take any blood thinners.

Conscious sedation is usually very safe. However, if too much sedating medicine is given, problems with breathing may occur. All steps, including vital sign and oxygenation monitoring, are taken to insure safe sedation, and reversal agents are kept on hand.

Tell your doctor about any allergies you have.

### **What happens after the procedure?**

You will need someone to drive you home. The local anesthetic injected near the nerves can result in temporary headache, lightheadedness, dizziness, and nausea.

There may be some local discomfort from needle placement for a few days. This may be treated with ice packs and oral pain medication. Local massage may also help.

You may resume normal activity as tolerated but should limit your activities to those which you could do prior to the procedure. Overexertion may lead to injury.

### **What about other medications I am taking?**

You should talk to the doctor who prescribed any blood thinning medication before resuming it.

You may continue taking your other pain medications after the procedure, if necessary.

### **How long does this treatment last?**

In various studies, 66% of patients had long term relief of pain, but the duration of this relief varied. Typically, pain relief lasts for 6-12 months, but some patients have relief of

pain for many years. If there is early recurrence of symptoms, this may mean that pain is coming from places other than the treated facet joints and further testing may be necessary to localize other sources of pain.

**If my pain comes back, can this be repeated?**

The procedure can be repeated if there is a good result (6-12 months of pain relief) with the first therapy, but repeat treatments are reported to be successful in only 50% of patients. Your doctor and we will consider your case individually and determine if additional treatment will help your pain.

**Where can I get additional information regarding this procedure?**

Ask your doctor or contact **Orthopedic Imaging Center** at **210-617-9100**.

To schedule, please call our offices: 210-617-9000