Radiofrequency Ablation

In radiofrequency ablation, a small electrical current is used to heat up an area of nerve tissue after numbing the nerve. The nerve is then unable to transmit pain signals. This procedure is used for facet joint, sacroiliac joint, and peripheral nerve pain. It is only done once we have determined that these joints and/or nerves are the source of pain. It may take two to three weeks before you experience pain relief, and your neck, back, or hip may be sore for two to four weeks after the procedure. Rarely, patients experience weakness in the neck, back, or hips for several weeks. Your pain relief may last for nine to 12 months. Eventually, the nerves will grow back, and your pain may return. If it does, this procedure may need to be repeated.

The Procedure

You will be placed on the X-ray table on your stomach. You will then have a small IV started in your hand. You will not be asleep for the procedure because we will need your help in pinpointing the nerve. The skin on your back will be cleaned to decrease the risk of infection. Next, the doctor will numb a small area of skin with numbing medicine. The medicine may sting for several seconds. The doctor will direct a special radiofrequency needle to the desired nerve using X-ray guidance. You may feel some pressure or slight discomfort. A small electrical current will stimulate the nerve and you will be asked by your doctor if you feel any tingling or “thumping.” These feelings (tingling or thumping) help the doctor find the nerve. Once the needle is in the right position, numbing medicine will be injected into the nerve. Then another electrical current will be used to burn the nerve. Burning of the nerve should not hurt. This procedure will be repeated at several different places to relieve your pain.
Side Effects and Risks

- Infection and bleeding
- Soreness at the site of injection and muscle spasm
- Temporary weakness
- Nerve injury
- Numbness of an area of skin
- Lack of balance

The Day of Your Procedure

- Do not eat or drink anything for six hours before the procedure since this increases your risk of nausea and vomiting.
- Please have a driver accompany you to your appointment. Your driver must stay through the duration of your appointment. If you do not have a driver, your appointment will be rescheduled.
- Follow the directions your doctor gave you concerning your blood thinners (including Coumadin, Plavix, Lovenox, Ticlid, Pletal, and Pradaxa). They increase your risk of bleeding.
- If you are not feeling well or have been placed on antibiotics since your last appointment with us, please call us before your procedure.
- You may not be able to receive your block if you do not follow these recommendations.

After the Procedure

You will be observed in the recovery room for about 30 minutes. You should limit your activity for two days after your procedure. Someone must accompany you home after the procedure.

Notify the clinic or go to the emergency room if you notice swelling or redness at the injection site, experience increased leg weakness, or experience a new onset of bowel or bladder dysfunction.

The Pain Treatment Clinic
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- We are located on the 3rd floor of UAB Highlands.
- Entrance to the Pain Treatment Clinic is located next to the Emergency Room entrance.
- Free parking is across the street in the deck.