Radiofrequency Ablation Patient Education

An important part of helping you manage your pain is for you to have clear understanding about your treatment. This literature contains important information on Radiofrequency Treatment.

What does the procedure involve?

Radiofrequency is an outpatient procedure, performed in a fluoroscopy room at Vermont Interventional Spine Center.

Depending on the nerves being treated, you will be positioned on your stomach for nerves in the back or neck. The area will be cleansed with an antiseptic solution and the doctor will inject some numbing medicine into the skin that may cause a burning sensation for a few seconds. After the numbing medicine takes effect and with the assistance of a special x-ray machine called a fluoroscope, the doctor will insert a special radiofrequency needle. You will feel some dull pressure but minimal pain. After confirming that the needle tip is in position, an electrode is inserted into the needle. Again, the proper location of the needle is confirmed by fluoroscopy. Using electrical stimulation, the doctor will verify the correct nerve; you will feel a tingling, buzzing, or pressure sensation (not pain). You may also experience some minimal muscle twitching.

The tissues surrounding the needle tip are then heated or pulsed when electric current is passed using the radiofrequency machine for 60 – 120 seconds. This will numb the nerves.

After the procedure, you are able to leave office as long as you are accompanied by a driver.

Can I go to sleep for the procedure?

Since it is important for you to talk with the doctor and describe what you feel, you will not be put to sleep.

How long will the procedure take?

Depending upon the situation, radiofrequency procedures will take 30 minutes to one hour to complete the procedure.

What should I do before the procedure?

1) Be sure to have a driver to take you home.

2) You may need to stop taking certain medications several days before the procedure, ie. Coumadin, Plavix, Ticlid, Lovenox, Aggrenox, Aspirin, or high doses of Vitamin E. Please remind the doctor of all prescription and over-the-counter medications you
take, including herbal and vitamin supplements. If your primary care or referring physician has started you on any blood thinners, be sure to check with them prior to discontinuing the medication.

3) If this is a cervical procedure, you may not eat for 6 hours prior to the procedure. If this is a procedure of the lumbar spine, you may have a small snack/meal up to 2 hours prior to the procedure.

4) If you are a diabetic, be sure to discuss your eating and medication schedule with your doctor.

5) Tell the doctor if you have developed a cold, fever, or flu symptoms before your scheduled appointment.

Is there anything special that I need to do after the procedure?

* After the procedure, you may experience some muscle soreness for a few days. If so, you may want to apply ice or a cold compress to the affected area.
* Do not drive for the remainder of the day. Please have an adult drive you home or accompany you in a taxi or other public transportation.
* Depending on how you feel, you may resume normal activities and return to work the following day.
* If the doctor prescribes physical therapy, it is very important that you continue with the physical therapy program.

What are the risks of RadioFrequency Ablation?

The risks, although infrequent, include:

- Allergic reaction to the medication
- Bruising at the injection site
- Infection at the injection site
- Damage to nerves or blood vessels near the treated nerve.
- Results will vary from person to person. There is a 50% chance that results are not effective from this procedure.

What is the purpose of Radiofrequency Procedures?

Radiofrequency is a procedure that sends radio waves (heat or pulsed) through a needle to damage small sensory nerve endings and interrupt pain signals. Radiofrequency is considered quite effective. Some patients report pain relief for 6 months to two years after the procedure. Since nerve endings have tendency to grow back, the pain will probably return at some time in the future. Fortunately, the procedure can be repeated if necessary.