



## **Radiofrequency Ablation to Treat Facet Joint Pain**

### **Why do facet joints become painful?**

When a facet joint is injured, pain signals from the facet joints travel along sensory nerves called the medial branches to the spinal cord and then to the brain. The injury may involve the cartilage (slippery covering of the ends of bones), the capsule, or the ligaments that surround the joint and connect it to the other parts of the spine. Additionally, the joint injury/pain may also cause muscle spasms through a natural “reflex action.” The location of the pain depends upon which facet joint has been injured.

### **How is facet joint pain diagnosed?**

Facet joint pain can be hard to see on X-rays or MRI (magnetic resonance imaging tests). Before a lumbar radiofrequency ablation (lumbar RFA) is considered, your doctor will perform a clinical exam and may recommend a diagnostic procedure to temporarily block the medial branch nerve to identify the source of pain.

### **What is a radiofrequency ablation?**

RFA is a procedure that uses radio waves to stop the medial branch nerve from transmitting pain signals from the injured facet joint to the brain. The procedure calls for a needle to be inserted through the skin and guided with X-ray to the correct site overlying the medial branch nerve.

### **Before the procedure:**

You will meet with a doctor who will explain the risks and benefits of the procedure and answer any questions you may have. The potential risks include, but are not limited to:

- Infection
- Bleeding
- Nerve Injury
- Temporary pain increase
- Please let us know if you have had fevers, antibiotic treatment, any illnesses, or hospitalization within the last 4 weeks. You must be healthy on the day of the procedure.
- Please let us know if you have a spinal cord stimulator or pacemaker device as we will have to make special arrangements for these devices on the day of your procedure.

### **The day of the procedure:**

- Continue to take all medications, ESPECIALLY BLOOD PRESSURE MEDICATIONS. Bring all of your medications with you so you can take them as needed before the procedure. Please note: your blood sugar and blood pressure will need to be within a safe range on the day of the procedure.

- If you have a spinal cord stimulator, PLEASE BRING THE REMOTE WITH YOU to your appointment.
- You will need to have someone drive you home after the procedure. Please bring a responsible adult driver with you to your appointment.

### What will happen during the procedure?

- The procedure will take 20 to 30 minutes, with you lying on your stomach.
- You will be given local anesthesia. You will be awake during the procedure. Sedation is an option for the procedure. You will need to discuss this with your doctor at your visit before the procedure.
- The needle will be directed to its proper location using X-ray guidance.
- During the procedure, the doctor will ask you if you feel a tingling sensation or if you feel your muscle twitching. This will help ensure the electrode is in the proper place.
- Once the needle and electrode are in the correct location, the nerve is heated with radio waves until that nerve is unable to pass pain signals to the brain.

### After the procedure:

- A bandage may be placed over the injection site.
- A responsible adult must drive you home. You must not drive yourself.
- You **may** have pain for 7 to 14 days after the procedure. You may use ice packs (20 minutes on and 20 minutes off) as well as Tylenol 500 mg four times a day as needed to help with the pain.
- After the procedure you may experience a sensation of weakness or numbness in the arms or legs. This is most often due to the local anesthetic used to numb the joint. It is temporary. Do not attempt to engage in any activity that requires balance or use of the extremities if you feel this.

### Discharge instructions:

- Do not drive or operate machinery for at least 24 hours after the radiofrequency ablation.
- You may resume your normal diet.
- Do not participate in strenuous activity that day.
- You may take a shower. Do not take a bath or sit in a hot tub for 48 hours.
- You may remove any bandages the morning following the procedure.

