

Lumbar Radio-Frequency Ablation

For Chronic Back Pain

A LUMBAR RADIO-FREQUENCY ABLATION (RFA) is a procedure for treating lower back pain. It is also called lumbar facet thermal coagulation or rhizotomy. This information has been provided by your doctor so you can better understand this procedure. Your doctor will make the best recommendation for your specific needs.

What are lumbar facet joints?

Facet joints are found on both sides of the spine. Each is about the size of a thumbnail. Lumbar facet joints are named for the vertebrae they connect and the side of the spine where they are found. The right L3-4 facet joints, for example, joins the 3rd and 4th vertebrae on the right side.

Face joints not only connect the vertebrae, but they also guide the spine during movement.

Medial branch nerves, located near facet joints, communicate pain from the facet joints. In other words, these nerves tell the brain when a facet joint has been injured.

What is lumbar facet joint pain?

Lumbar facet joint pain is a result of injury, either to the cartilage inside the joint or the connecting ligaments surrounding the joint.

Pain from an injured lumbar facet joint may range from simple muscle tension to more severe pain. Depending on which facet joint is affected, the pain may occur in an area from your hip down to your toe.

How do I know if I have lumbar facet pain?

If you have pain in one or more of these areas, and it has lasted longer than two months, you may have lumbar facet pain.

Common tests such as x-rays or MRIs may not show if a facet joint is the reason for your pain. The best way to diagnose facet pain is to block the pain signal in a medial branch nerve.

What is a lumbar RFA?

During this procedure, radio-frequency energy is used to disrupt function of a lumbar medial branch nerve, so that it can no longer transmit pain from an injured facet joint.

What happens during an RFA?

An RFA may start with an IV (medicine given intravenously) to help you relax. A local anesthetic may be used to numb you skin.

The doctor will then insert a thin needle near the facet joint. Fluoroscopy, a type of x-ray, will be used to position the needle. The doctor will then check that the needle is in the proper position by simulating the nerve. This may cause muscle twitching and provoke some of your pain.

With the needle in the correct position, the area will be numbed. Your doctor will then use radio-frequency energy to disrupt the medial branch nerve.

What happens after an RFA?

You will be monitored for up to 30 minutes after the injection. Before you leave, the clinic will give you discharge instructions as well as a pain diary. Keeping track of your pain helps your doctor know what the next steps are for your care.

You may feel sore for one to four days. This is normal, and may be caused by muscle and nerve irritation. Your back may feel numb, weak, or itchy for a couple of weeks. Be patient, as full pain relief normally takes two to three weeks.

How long can I expect pain relief?

Nerves regenerate after an RFA, but how long this takes varies. Your pain may or may not return when the nerves regenerate. If it does, another RFA can be done.