

MEDIAL BRANCH BLOCKS AND RADIOFREQUENCY ABLATION

You have been scheduled for a diagnostic procedure called a medial branch block. This procedure is done to determine if the small facet joints in your spine are contributing to the pain that you're experiencing.

These are diagnostic procedures, which means that we are looking to see if you get SHORT-TERM relief of your pain (anywhere from 30 minutes to a few hours) on the side that was injected. If you do get short-term relief, you will most likely have a return of your regular pain afterwards. This is OK, and is exactly what is supposed to happen.

Please make sure you call us to let us know if the injection helped out SHORT-TERM.

If you get short-term relief from your first injection, the procedure will then be repeated 2 weeks later. If you again get short-term relief from a second diagnostic injection, then you will be scheduled for the definitive therapeutic procedure, called radiofrequency ablation ("nerve burning" or RFA).

If you have had 2 positive diagnostic blocks (short-term relief of your pain followed by a return of your pain) and proceed on to the RFA procedure, there is about an 80-85% chance that you will get benefit from that procedure. The pain relief may take 2-3 weeks to become obvious since the nerves need to die away after the RFA. During those 2-3 weeks you may have a little more pain than usual, which is normal and OK.

If either of the diagnostic injections do not give you short term relief, then we do not go to the next step (repeat procedure or RFA) and you will be seen in clinic to discuss further pain management options.

The RFA procedure is performed similarly to the medial branch blocks, but with a special needle and probe (a wire that fits inside the special needle). It is no more painful than the diagnostic injections. After each needle is in place, the nerves are tested with an electrical charge. As long as the test is normal (your doctor will walk you through the test), then the nerves are numbed, and an electrical charge is placed on the nerve to "burn" it (actually, no burning occurs, but the nerve will melt away over the course of a few weeks). You will most likely have numbness and weakness in the leg on the side where the procedure was done, and this is normal. It will last about a day, and improve on its own.

Risks of both the medial branch block and RFA include, but are not limited to, bleeding, infection, nerve root injury (could result in permanent pain, sensory changes or weakness), spinal cord injury, headaches, seizure, stroke, or death. None of these are likely to occur, but are still real risks. As implied above, there is about a 15-20% chance of getting no relief after the RFA procedure, even though you had 2 positive diagnostic injections.

Fred J. Dery Jr., M.D.
Daniel B. Goldish, M.D.
Interventional Pain Management
Steindler Orthopedic Clinic