

Radiofrequency Ablation Information

What is radiofrequency ablation (RFA)? Also sometimes called radiofrequency lesioning, radiofrequency neurotomy, or facet denervation, RFA is an outpatient, minimally invasive procedure that deactivates nerves that are causing pain.

Why does my doctor recommend an RFA? In the spine and joints, arthritis, degeneration (age-related wear and tear), or injury can sometimes cause pain and reduce your activity. Facet joints (two small joints at each vertebra) and the sacroiliac joint (at the lowest part of the spine near the pelvis) can be treated with RFA. The knee can be treated as well.

How does my doctor know which nerve to treat? Before the RFA procedure, you will need at least one and probably two *diagnostic nerve blocks* (depending on your insurance plan.) These nerve blocks are done with a local anesthetic, and the effect of these nerve blocks will only be a few hours. The diagnostic nerve block(s) are done as an outpatient procedure. If you have significant pain relief after your diagnostic nerve block(s), the doctor can then move forward with the RFA.

What can I expect for pain relief? An RFA can provide pain relief for anywhere from 3 months to 2 years. Your body can eventually regrow the nerve that was causing pain. If this happens, the RFA can be repeated.

What are the steps to having an RFA?

- A total of 6-7 appointments altogether including:
 - A detailed history and physical, along with imaging (usually MRI) of the pain source showing the affected joint.
 - Within 30 days of each diagnostic nerve block and the RFA, an “HPI” visit in the office is required.
 - If the diagnostic nerve block is successful, most insurance companies require prior authorization before the RFA. If your insurance company denies the procedure, this can delay your treatment.
 - A medical clearance visit with your primary care provider may be required prior to the RFA.

What is the RFA procedure like? The procedure is performed in a hospital or ambulatory surgical center. You may have mild sedation. A local anesthetic is used to numb the area to be treated. There is no incision. The physician uses x-ray to guide a small insulated needle to the area which is causing pain. The RFA uses heat on targeted nerves with the goal of interrupting the pain signals, thus eliminating pain.

How should I care for myself after RFA? After the procedure is done, patients will be monitored in the recovery room until released by staff. Follow all discharge instructions as provided at the time of discharge. You should rest, and avoid sitting and driving for long periods of time in the first week after your procedure. Some patients experience some mild pain around the injection site for several days. Pain relief usually begins 1-2 weeks after the procedure, although it can take longer. Your doctor may prescribe a brace or physical therapy as well.