

Percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation for lower back pain

**Understanding NICE guidance –
information for people considering the
procedure, and for the public**

August 2004



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About this information

This information describes the guidance that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has issued to the NHS on a procedure called percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation. It is not a complete description of what is involved in the procedure – the patient’s healthcare team should describe it in detail.

NICE has looked at whether percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation is safe enough and works well enough for it to be used routinely for the treatment of pain in the lower back.

To produce this guidance, NICE has:

- looked at the results of studies on the safety of percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation and how well it works
- asked experts for their opinions
- asked the views of the organisations that speak for the healthcare professionals and the patients and carers who will be affected by this guidance.

This guidance is part of NICE’s work on ‘interventional procedures’ (see ‘Further information’ on page 10).

About percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation

Percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation is a procedure for what's known as discogenic pain in the lower back. This happens when one or more of the tough discs that sit between the small bones (vertebrae) in the spine become damaged.

Usually, discogenic pain is treated with medicines and/or a health programme that may include, for example, exercises. If this doesn't help, the person may be offered surgery on their back that will fuse ('weld') two of the vertebrae together.

NICE has looked at percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation, which involves heating the damaged disc from the inside to try to overcome the effects of the damage. A needle is put into the disc that's causing the problem (X-rays are used to help find the correct position). A narrow piece of equipment (either an electrode or a coil) is then passed in through this needle and moved to the centre of the disc. This is then heated slowly and kept in place for a certain time.

How well it works

What the studies said

In one study that involved 39 patients, there was a general improvement in pain levels following the procedure (on average, this was measured 16 months after the procedure). But two other studies found that there was no difference in patients' pain levels before and after the procedure.

In general, it was hard to see exactly what was happening from the studies because it is difficult to measure and compare the amount of pain people feel. Also, just going through the process of having a procedure may have a positive ('placebo') effect on some people. NICE also commented that the studies involved small numbers of patients. Studies with large numbers of patients tend to give more reliable results.

What the experts said

The experts were not sure that percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation worked. And they thought that the results from the studies weren't clear enough to show it worked.

Risks and possible problems

What the studies said

According to the report from one study, there were no problems either during or after the procedure. It was difficult to see whether this was because there really were no problems, or whether it was because patients weren't checked thoroughly or because problems were uncommon, or because problems weren't reported.

What the experts said

The experts did not have any particular concerns about the safety of the procedure. But they said that infection and damage to the nerve root were possible.

What has NICE decided?

NICE has decided that, if a doctor wants to carry out percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation for lower back pain, he or she should make sure that the patient understands what is involved and that there are still uncertainties over the safety of the procedure and how well it works. There should be special arrangements in place so that the patient only agrees (consents) to the procedure after this discussion has taken place.

NICE has encouraged doctors who carry out percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation to follow what happens in their patients over a longer time than they might do otherwise. NICE may look at the procedure again if new information becomes available.

Other comments from NICE

NICE noted that the studies only looked at a small number of patients. It is also difficult to know whether the improvements seen were because of having the procedure, or because the condition improved naturally.

NICE has also commented that high doses of the type of heat used in this procedure could be dangerous for the patient and that doctors should be particularly careful when they're carrying out this type of procedure.

What the decision means for you

Your doctor may have offered you percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation for lower back pain. NICE has considered this procedure because it is relatively new. NICE has decided that there are uncertainties about the benefits and risks of percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation for lower back pain that you need to understand before you agree to it. Your doctor should discuss the benefits and risks with you. Some of these may be described above.

Further information

You have the right to be fully informed and to share in decision-making about the treatment you receive. You may want to discuss this guidance with the doctors and nurses looking after you.

You can visit the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk) for further information about the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Interventional Procedures Programme. A copy of the full guidance on percutaneous intradiscal radiofrequency thermocoagulation for lower back pain is on the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk/IPG083guidance), or you can order a copy from the website or by telephoning the NHS Response Line on 0870 1555 455 and quoting reference number N0671. The evidence that NICE considered in developing this guidance is also available from the NICE website.

If you want more information on back problems, a good starting point is NHS Direct (telephone 0845 4647) or NHS Direct Online (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk).

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