

Endoscopic laser foraminoplasty

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

December 2003



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Issue date: December 2003

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Copies of this booklet can be ordered from the NHS Response Line; telephone 0870 1555 455 and quote reference number N0395. A version in Welsh and English is also available, reference number N0396. Mae fersiwn yn Gymraeg ac yn Saesneg ar gael hefyd, rhif cyfeirnod N0396. The NICE interventional procedures guidance on which this information is based is available from the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk). Copies can also be obtained from the NHS Response Line, reference number N0394.

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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 endoscopic laser foraminoplasty. 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 endoscopic laser foraminoplasty is safe enough and works well enough for it to be used routinely for the treatment of long-lasting back and leg pain.

To produce this guidance, NICE has:

- looked at the results of studies on the safety of endoscopic laser foraminoplasty and how well it works
- asked experts for their opinion
- 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 endoscopic laser foraminoplasty

Endoscopic laser foraminoplasty is used to treat people with long-lasting back and leg pain. This type of pain can be caused by problems with the discs that act as cushions between the bones of the spine (which are called vertebrae). The discs have a tough outer cover, with a jelly-like material inside it. If the outer cover is damaged or weakened, the material inside can stretch the cover outwards, distorting the shape of the disc. This is a slipped disc, and the medical term for it is a prolapsed intervertebral disc. If the distorted disc presses on a nerve or the spinal cord it can cause pain.

The nerves that go to the legs leave the spinal cord in the lower back, and pass through an opening in the vertebra called a foramen. If the foramen becomes narrowed – for example, by a slipped disc – this can cause pain in the lower back and legs. Most people recover from this in time without an operation. But if the pain remains severe for a long time, or there are problems with the nerves, the person may be offered an operation.

Endoscopic laser foraminoplasty is a new type of operation used to treat back and leg pain. A thin flexible telescope (called an endoscope) is inserted through a small cut in the patient's back, and guided to the affected vertebra. A laser is passed down the endoscope, and used to remove the parts of the disc that are narrowing the foramen. This reduces the pressure on the nerve, which should relieve the pain.

How well it works

What the studies said

There have not been many studies on endoscopic laser foraminoplasty, but in general patients said they had less pain after having the procedure.

What the experts said

The experts thought there was not enough evidence to be sure the procedure worked.

Risks and possible problems

What the studies said

Few patients have had problems after having endoscopic laser foraminoplasty. Swelling of the disc and nerve damage were the most common problems, but they each affected less than 1 of every 100 people who had the procedure.

What the experts said

The experts said that possible problems might include damage to the nerves and infection.

What has NICE decided?

NICE has decided that, if a doctor wants to carry out endoscopic laser foraminoplasty, 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. There should also be special arrangements for monitoring what happens when a person has endoscopic laser foraminoplasty.

What the decision means for you

Your doctor may have offered you endoscopic laser foraminoplasty. NICE has considered this procedure because it is relatively new. NICE has decided that there are uncertainties about the benefits and risks of endoscopic laser foraminoplasty which you need to understand before you agree to it. Your doctor should discuss the benefits and risks with you. Some of these benefits and risks may be described in this booklet.

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 endoscopic laser foraminoplasty is on the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk/IPG031guidance), or you can order a copy from the website or by telephoning the NHS Response Line on 0870 1555 455 and quoting reference number N0394. The evidence that NICE considered in developing this guidance is also available from the NICE website.

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

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