

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Back Pain Offered New Hope”

If you deal with daily chronic back pain, you're willing to try almost anything to find relief. About 80 percent of adults experience low back pain at some point in their lifetimes. It is the most common cause of job-related disability. Chronic back pain is defined as pain that persists for 12 weeks or longer. About 20 percent of people affected by acute low back pain develop chronic low back pain with persistent symptoms at one year. Chronic pain usually cannot be cured. But, treatments can help. They include medicines, acupuncture, electrical stimulation and surgery. Other treatments include psychotherapy, relaxation and meditation therapy, biofeedback, and behavior modification. For longer-lasting relief, a doctor may suggest a pain pump. Chronic back pain tends to be very difficult to treat, especially in cases involving failed back surgery or neuropathic pain (nerve pain). Men and women are equally affected by low back pain, which can range in intensity from a dull, constant ache to a sudden, sharp sensation that leaves the person incapacitated. Back pain has grown worse in recent years. In 1990, a study ranking the most burdensome conditions in the U.S. in terms of mortality or poor health as a result of disease put low back pain in sixth place; in 2010, low back pain jumped to third place. For 90% of people with back pain because of a herniated disk, symptoms will pass within 6 weeks. But for the remaining 10%, it is unlikely that current medical treatments alone will alleviate pain. In severe cases, surgery to ease nerve pressure is the best option. Researchers now say that CT-guided pulsed radiotherapy technique could help to alleviate chronic low back pain. The new and minimally invasive treatment was tested on 80 people who had chronic low back pain—that is, low back pain lasting for at least 3 months—due to a herniated disk. More than 80% of people with chronic low back pain who received a single, 10-minute pulsed radiofrequency treatment are pain-free after 1 year, a new study revealed. The new treatment involves using computed tomography (CT) imaging to help guide a needle to the patient's herniated disk and nerve root. Next, a probe is inserted into the needle. For 10 minutes, the probe delivers pulses of electrical energy to the affected area. After having just one session of the CT-guided pulsed radiofrequency procedure, 90% of the participants were pain-free within a month, and 81% of these subjects remained free of pain after 1 year. Dr. Alessandro Napoli said, “Importantly, 90% of the subjects were able to avoid surgery and none of the subjects experienced side effects.”

In the America that I love, back pain relief may be in sight.

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