

East Sussex MSK Community Partnership

Understanding Medial Branch Block & Radiofrequency Ablation

This treatment pathway is offered when pain comes from the small joints in your spine, called facet joints. This usually causes a chronic, aching pain in your back or neck that doesn't shoot down your arms or legs. Your spine is made up of bony building blocks (vertebrae). The facet joints are small, knuckle-sized joints on the back of the spine that link these blocks together. They allow your back and neck to bend, twist, and move, but they also stop excessive motion.

When these joints become irritated or worn, they can cause a specific type of pain:

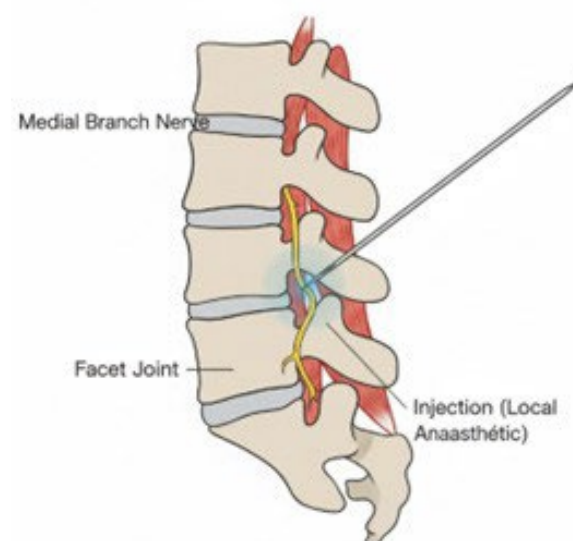
- **Location:** It usually causes a deep, aching pain mainly in the center of your back or neck.
- **Spread:** The pain does not typically shoot down your arms or legs.
- **Trigger:** It often feels worse when bending backward or when holding the same posture for a long time.

1. The Test: Medial Branch Block (MBB)

The Medial Branch Block (MBB) is a diagnostic injection (a test).

What is it? A clinician injects a local anaesthetic (like the dentist uses) near the tiny nerves (**medial branch nerves**) that send pain signals from your facet joints.

What does it do? If the anaesthetic numbs the nerves and your pain goes away for a short time, it tells the clinician that your facet joints are the source of the pain.

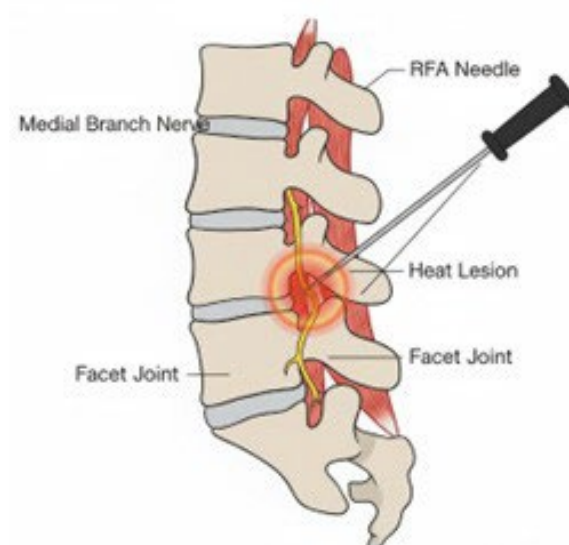


2. The Treatment: Radiofrequency Ablation (RFA)

If the MBB test successfully relieves your pain, you may be offered the longer-term treatment called Radiofrequency Ablation (RFA).

What is it? A special needle uses a small amount of heat (radio waves) to “switch off” or disrupt the specific medial branch nerves confirmed by the MBB.

Goal: This stops the nerve from sending pain signals to your brain, giving you longer relief.



Why is This Treatment Offered?

This treatment is offered to you if:

- You have **chronic back or neck pain** that isn't getting better.
- Other options, like **physiotherapy and simple medication**, haven't helped.
- Clinicians suspect your pain is coming from your **facet joints**.

Benefits (What You Gain):

- The MBB test **confirms exactly where the pain is coming from**.
- RFA can **reduce pain and help you move better**.
- It's a small, day-case procedure, **much less drastic than major surgery**.

What Are the Chances of Success? (Outcomes)

Success depends on the joint being the correct cause of the pain. Remember that RFA relief is usually temporary because the nerves will grow back.

- **A successful test (MBB):** 60 to 80 out of 100 people are confirmed as good candidates for RFA. This relief is only short-term.
- **Pain relief after RFA (3 months):** 65 to 80 out of 100 people feel significant relief (50% or more less pain).
- **Duration of relief:** The relief typically lasts for 6 to 12 months for most people.
- **If pain comes back:** If the pain returns, repeating the RFA works well for 60 to 70 out of 100 people.

Risks and Limitations (What Could go Wrong?)

The procedures are generally very safe, but like any medical treatment, there are small risks.

- **No lasting benefit:** 20 to 35 out of 100 people get no useful relief, even if the block worked. The treatment didn't help long-term.
- **Temporary pain flare:** 20 to 30 out of 100 people get worse pain for a few days after RFA, which is your body's reaction to the heat treatment.
- **Numbness / tingling:** 5 to 10 out of 100 people feel temporary numbness where the treatment was, but this usually goes away on its own.
- **Bleeding / infection:** This is a very low chance (less than 1 in 100). The clinician uses sterile techniques to prevent this.
- **Serious nerve injury:** This is extremely rare (less than 1 in 10,000). The small nerves being treated are mainly sensory (meaning they don't control your movement).

Recovery and Alternatives

Recovery

- You might feel **sore** in the area for a few days.
- **Take it easy** for 1 to 2 days; don't do anything strenuous.
- Gradually start getting back to your usual exercise.
- You will usually start feeling the main benefit of the RFA after **1 to 3 weeks**.

Other Options (Alternatives)

- **Keep trying conservative care:** Continue with physiotherapy, exercise, and pain medications.
- **Multidisciplinary pain management:** Work with a team of pain specialists, including psychologists, for a holistic approach to managing chronic pain.