Controlling the PAIN

Area hospitals offer the latest treatments to help patients find relief

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If you’ve ever stubbed your toe or banged your shin, you know the feeling of acute pain, where agony briefly hits before completely alleviating. Certain types of pain, however, do not simply go away. Instead, chronic pain, often brought on by injury or disease, causes extreme discomfort that is difficult to relieve, making it hard to go about your daily life.

Fortunately, pain specialists at area hospitals offer a combination of new, revamped and cutting-edge treatments to help alleviate chronic pain.

At St. Joseph’s Regional Medical Center in Paterson, physicians use an advanced form of spinal cord stimulation to treat chronic pain in the lower back, lower extremities and neck. “With spinal cord stimulation, two wires are placed within the spine and a small generator is permanently implanted under the skin in the lower back, and patients can go home the same day and continue their normal routine,” says Dr. Michael Umanoff, director of the hospital’s pain management center, Total Pain Care.

He says the procedure, which patients receive after first undergoing a one week trial, works by interrupting pain signals being sent to the brain. And while the treatment itself is not new, recent advances in technology now allow for much greater pain control.

“The new equipment uses ultra-high-frequency stimulation, which fires so rapidly the patient doesn’t feel anything,” Umanoff says.

“Traditionally, patients felt a tingling sensation from the stimulator which often increased in intensity when they changed positions, and could get so strong that it became uncomfortable. So they would often have to adjust the stimulation or even turn it off while they were sleeping.”

Now, with sensation-free high frequency treatment, patients are experiencing superior relief. “Whereas before we had success rates of about 60 percent, we are now approaching success rates of about 80 percent,” says Umanoff.

At Teaneck’s Holy Name Medical Center, pain management specialist Dr. Samyadev Datta uses cutting-edge technology to treat pain resulting from spinal cord tumors. “Sometimes when there is a metastasis in the spinal column, a patient continues to have pain after chemotherapy and radiation,” Datta explains. “With a technique called targeted radiofrequency ablation, we can now put a needle into the body of the bone and maneuver its flexible probe towards the tumor, and then cauterize the tumor, thereby greatly reducing the amount of pain being experienced by the patient.”

He adds that when done in combination with traditional radiation, the procedure reduces the likelihood of the tumor’s recurrence. “It’s a very safe procedure and patients have seen very good results from it,” he says. “The pain gets better within the next few days.”

In addition, Datta is making innovative use of an existing medication to help patients control neuropathic pain caused by damage to nerve fibers, which often result in shooting or burning sensations, among other debilitating symptoms.

“Naltrexone is FDA-approved as an opioid reverse, used to treat drug and alcohol addiction,” Datta says. “But when administered in very low doses to patients with no opioids in their system, naltrexone induces the brain to release endorphins, which are our own internal pain-kilers, so we’re able to reduce pain without giving patients pain-killers.”

He adds that traditional pain medications like morphine and oxycodone carry a dangerous risk of addiction, which naltrexone does not have.

“Naltrexone also blocks the production of a chemical that causes inflammation, and allows the body to boost its own immune system,” he says. “With this treatment, patients with difficult to control chronic pain have been able to stop using traditional pain medication with excellent results.”
As medical director of the Valley Pain Management Center at The Valley Hospital in Ridgewood, Dr. Robert Silverman is performing a state-of-the-art procedure for patients with chronic knee pain. The treatment, known as Cooled Radiofrequency Ablation, blocks a significant portion of the sensory nerve supply to the knee, giving patients profound relief.

"It's a two-step process whereby a patient first has a Novocaine injection where the nerves are, and if they feel good a few hours later, we bring them back in and use a similar technique to the initial injection to cauterize those same little nerve endings," Silverman says.

The treatment is for patients who have had a knee replacement and still have pain or for those who should have a knee replacement but can't due to factors like age or existing medical condition. "Perhaps someone has severe arthritis in their knee, but they have a heart problem or another condition that precludes them from having anesthetia," he says. "Those are good candidates for the procedure."

Since the nerves regenerate over time, ablation is often repeated when pain returns. However, relief usually lasts at least six months, and the treatment itself takes only about 30 minutes.

"Right now it's approved for knees and hips," says Silverman, noting that The Valley Hospital currently uses the procedure only on knees. "Patients who weren't responding to other treatments for knee pain, like prescription anti-inflammatories and steroid injections, are really responding to this. We've seen great results."

INTEGRATIVE MANAGEMENT

In addition, two breakthrough pain treatments are currently undergoing experimental protocols at Hackensack University Medical Center, both of which Contreras hopes will be available by the end of the 2016. "One procedure is called a cingulotomy, which targets lesions deep in an area of the brain responsible for the integration of feeling, emotion and pain," he says. "It's a radical measure that we would use for terminal patients who are really struggling and not having success with conservative treatments."

The other procedure, cordotomy, surgically disables pain conducting tracts in the spinal cord for patients suffering severe pain from cancer and other non-curable diseases. Both procedures will be done under experimental protocol in collaboration with the Department of Neurosurgery.

While cutting-edge technology offers significant new ways to treat chronic pain, many pain relief specialists have put a renewed focus on more integrative means of pain management. At Englewood Hospital and Medical Center, Dr. Jeff Gadlin takes a multi-modal approach to treating pain. As medical director of pain and palliative care, he combines the latest treatments with holistic therapies offered on-site.
NO MORE OPIATES

St. Joseph’s Healthcare System has officially announced ALTO, Alternatives to Opiates Program, the first program of its kind in the United States.

Led by Dr. Mark Rosenberg, chairman of emergency medicine and medical director for population health at St. Joseph’s Healthcare System, and spearheaded by Dr. Alexis LaFeber, medical director of pain management in the emergency department at St. Joseph’s Regional Medical Center, the program hopes to stem the use of opiates whenever possible in the emergency department.

The ALTO Program was launched in early January 2016, with patients treated with alternative protocols instead of opioids when they previously would have been treated with the narcotic pain medicine. The program uses targeted non-opioid medications, trigger-point injections, nitrous oxide and ultrasound-guided nerve blocks to tailor its patients’ pain management needs and avoid opioids whenever possible. Some examples of use are cases of kidney stones, acute low-back pain, broken bones, acute headache and migraine pain.

“We certainly use the latest in device technology and perform cutting-edge procedures,” Gudin says. “But medications haven’t proven entirely safe. There’s no shortage of opioid overdoses, and even over-the-counter drugs have caused liver failure and heart attacks. So it’s very important to get back to basics and look at other means of helping patients help themselves through pain.”

To that end, the pain management team works closely with the newly opened Graf Center for Integrative Medicine to offer additional options for pain therapy.

“Oftentimes pain has to do with other things going on in our lives, such as trauma or stress, which can make existing pain so much worse,” says Dr. Despina Psilidou, the Graf Center’s medical director, who notes that alternative therapies have proven results. “Certain types of yoga are known to reduce chronic low back pain and the stress reduction from deep breathing also reduces pain symptoms. Acupuncture has been extensively studied as well and offers patients a lot of relief.”

The center offers a number of therapies explicitly intended for pain patients. “We’ve developed a nutritional counseling session specifically designed to reduce pain,” Psilidou says. “The counseling concentrates on adding anti-inflammatory foods to diminish inflammation in the body and thereby decrease pain, and we also help patients identify possible food sensitivities they may not know they have but which are actually contributing to their pain symptoms.”

In addition, the center offers a “Yoga for Neuropathy” class to treat complex nerve pain that is often difficult to control, as well as massages with essential oils. “Studies show that when you use lavender essential oil applied with acupressure techniques, it reduces pain intensity and improves mobility in pain patients,” says Psilidou.

Hackensack University Medical Center also offers alternative pain management therapies through its wellness center and the recently developed Debra Simms Center for Integrative Medicine. Dr. Jose Contreras, chair of the hospital’s department of pain and palliative care, says today’s pain patients are encouraged to look into the non-pharmacological treatments they offer and that more resources are being brought in to further develop these offerings.

“There’s a real public health crisis right now. Pain patients are not getting sufficient pain management and people are afraid to deal with them because of the medications they may be on,” Contreras says. “That’s why alternative therapy is an important component of a comprehensive pain treatment plan.”

Among the treatments offered there are massage and aromatherapy, as well as Reiki, a Japanese technique whereby the body’s energy is rearranged to promote stress reduction and healing.

Though chronic pain can be debilitating, patients now have many new ways to find relief. With advanced technology and enhanced integrative offerings, area hospitals offer patients the latest options for relieving their chronic pain and living a more enjoyable life.