

## Pain management goes high-tech to help patients avoid pills

August 24, 2013 | By Nicole Brochu, Staff writer

In South Florida, pain management used to be synonymous with pain pills.

But in the age of the pill mill crackdown, with fewer doctors prescribing the meds, a growing number of legitimate pain sufferers are finding long-elusive relief with sophisticated, high-tech devices that soothe the hurt — with none of the complications or side effects of addictive drugs.



Linda Fromm of Delray Beach talks about the chronic pain she suffered after... (Mark Randall, Sun Sentinel )

And the results are so effective, many no longer depend on medication to get them through the day, local doctors say.

"We are using some real state-of-the-art technology to help patients get off narcotics that are becoming increasingly hard to get," said Dr. Scott Berger, a board-certified pain medicine specialist in [Boca Raton](#). "These are not only drug-free, non-addictive therapies, they're allowing us to treat some formerly difficult-to-treat problems."

The latest devices differ in their delivery but essentially do the same thing: send electrical signals to the brain that block the sensation of pain. Among them are: a spinal cord stimulator; the Electroanalgesic Delivery System; and pulse radiofrequency therapies.

They have the support of the Food and Drug Administration, Medicare and the insurance industry — all critical for patient access. For those who meet certain criteria and suffer qualifying chronic-pain conditions, the FDA-approved options are covered by most insurance plans, Berger said.

A recent study by a Massachusetts-based workers compensation group found that since Florida's July 2011 ban prohibiting doctors from dispensing addictive painkillers, physicians are prescribing fewer of the drugs.

In this new climate, pain specialists like Dr. Neel Amin are working hard to inform patients about the new alternatives.

"The goal would be to reduce the amount of medications the patient is taking," said Amin, a Fort Lauderdale physician board-certified in anesthesiology and pain medicine. "You don't need to throw people on all these narcotics. There are other options."

One of the most effective, both Amin and Berger say, is the spinal cord stimulator, a high-tech device implanted in the back.

Before [Delray Beach](#) resident Linda Fromm was introduced to the device, her complex regional pain syndrome, brought on by a broken foot and subsequent surgery, had kept her in such agony that she couldn't walk or drive. She was dependent on her husband for almost everything, she said, and even the touch of the sheets at night was torture.

She tried prescription medications and pain-block injections, but little helped. The spinal cord stimulator Berger implanted near her spine had her back on her feet, pain-free, almost immediately.

"It's unbelievable," said Fromm, 56, who is walking and exercising and has lost 33 pounds. Her insurance company footed the full tab for the procedure's estimated \$23,000 cost.

The device, about the size of a silver dollar, is inserted in fatty tissue in the lower back and connected to one or two wires placed along certain points of the spine. When activated, the system sends signals to the spinal cord that prevent the brain from registering pain. The patient turns the unit off and on, and can control the frequency of the signals with a remote control the size of a garage opener.

"It tricks the brain into feeling a good sensation over a bad sensation," Amin said. "It's super, super high-tech. It's like the new wave of pain relief."

Amin and Berger are among a number of pain management specialists in South Florida who offer the treatment.

Because of the spinal cord stimulator's expense to the insurer, it's not for everyone. Insurers typically only cover the procedure for those in constant agony from multiple back surgeries, shingles or other chronic pain syndromes "who don't have any other options," Amin said. And because it is a surgical procedure, it carries the same risks — excessive bleeding, infection, incision pain and paralysis — as any other operation, along with the risk of implant rejection.

Other advanced technologies — like pulse radiofrequency therapies and the Electroanalgesic Delivery System, aka The Matrix — treat an even wider spectrum of ailments, helping patients who may otherwise lean on narcotics to soothe pain.

The \$26,000 Matrix machine, for example, is similar to the more commonly known Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (or TENS) unit, but is 32 times more powerful, sending out 8,000 pulses per second in varying frequencies through suction cups attached to aching areas of the back, neck or limb, said Dr. Michelle Mina, Berger's partner.

While blocking the brain from feeling pain, the treatment increases blood circulation and oxygenates the tissue, promoting faster healing and regeneration.

The treatments, which last 30 to 40 minutes each, relieve pain for up to a few days, but symptoms generally disappear altogether after about 15 sessions, all of which are covered by Medicare and most insurance plans, Mina said.



MARK RANDALL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A patient receives neck pain treatment from the Electro-analgesic Delivery System, known as The Matrix.

(Page 2 of 2)

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Since acquiring the machine in February, the practice uses it on five to 10 patients a day, Mina and Berger estimated, allowing them to [treat](#) patients with back and neck injuries, neuropathy, Crohn's disease, pelvic pain, endometriosis and a number of other typically treatment-resistant conditions.

Another effective option is radiofrequency ablation, which uses electromagnetic energy, delivered in alternate currents directly to painful areas through an electrode, to burn off the top of the nerve to help it regenerate, Amin said. The procedure, which is widely available in the pain [management](#) field, has been proven effective in relieving stubborn back and neck pain, he said.

Though these new, state-of-the-art therapies may be more costly to the insurer on the front end, the industry supports their use in patients because of the long-term cost savings.

"In the long run, it's cheaper on [health](#) care because it cuts down on hospital stays, medication usage, it improves quality of life and it gets the patient back in society," Amin said. "So overall, it's better."