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ACHES & CLAIMS

Alternative Procedure To Treat Hemorrhoids

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Can a one-second pulse of light provide relief from hemorrhoids? Infrared coagulation uses heat energy to cut off blood supply to the swollen areas, shrinking the hemorrhoids with little or no pain, says the company that sells the machines. Surgeons confirm the treatment is generally painless, but warn it is somewhat less effective than a more common procedure.

Hemorrhoids are enlarged veins in or around the anus that can sometimes protrude on the outside causing a bulge in the skin. About half of the U.S. population develop them by age 50, according to the National Institutes of Health. They aren't usually dangerous but many people choose to remove them if they cause discomfort.

Internal hemorrhoids can often be removed in the doctor's office. The most common procedure in the U.S. is rubber-band ligation, in which small bands are used to cut off circulation to hemorrhoids, causing them to slough off. Rubber-band ligation works well, but some patients experience an unpleasant pressure or ache, and in rare cases patients have suffered infections and even death.

In infrared coagulation, a small probe is used to zap tissue around the hemorrhoids for a second or two, causing blood vessels to coagulate. The procedure takes only five or 10 minutes and no anesthetic is needed. Patients feel a mild sensation of warmth, doctors say. The cost, which generally ranges from \$300 to \$600, is often covered by insurance. Like rubber-band ligation, multiple visits -- often from two to six -- are needed to shrink the hemorrhoids fully, and insurance may not cover it all.

Infrared coagulation has been available in the U.S. for more than two decades, but has gained popularity in recent years, according to Redfield Corp., of Rochelle Park, N.J., which makes the machines used in the procedure. Redfield says it knows of no serious complications. Side effects, generally mild, include bleeding or spotting for a few days, surgeons say.

Growing use of the procedure is due in part to hemorrhoid-treatment centers that promote it. The Hemorrhoid Relief Centers, in Fairfax, Va., does almost exclusively infrared coagulation because it produces "fantastic results" and is less painful than rubber-band ligation, says medical director Robert Meek.

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