Easing "phantom limb" pain

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Amputees sometimes experience shooting pains or burning sensations in limbs that are no longer there. These sensations seem to originate in the spinal cord and brain, perhaps because neural pathways are receiving mixed signals that something is not right.

A clinical trial by Emory Saint Joseph's Hospital interventional radiologist J. David Prologo is studying a minimally invasive treatment, cryoablation therapy, to see if it helps relieve symptoms.

Prologo is using CT imaging guidance to position a probe near the nerve responsible for the residual phantom pain. Once the probe is placed, the temperature is dropped for 25 minutes to create an ablation zone, and the signals the nerve was previously carrying are shut down. The outpatient procedure takes about one hour, and some patients have reported significantly decreased pain and improved function.

Norma Jean Robinson was one of the first patients to complete the cryoablation therapy at Emory Saint Joseph's. "On a scale of one to 10, my [phantom] pain had reached the highest level—a 10," says Robinson, whose leg had been amputated six months before. "This procedure dramatically changed the quality of my life."

Provided by Emory University