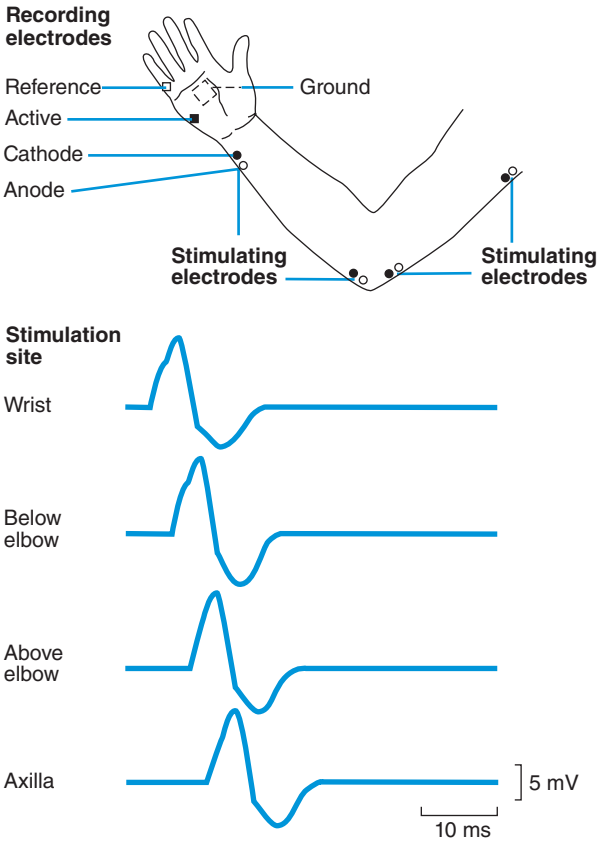

FIGURE 442e-4 Arrangement for motor conduction studies of the ulnar nerve. Responses are recorded with a surface electrode from the abductor digiti minimi muscle to supramaximal stimulation of the nerve at different sites, and are shown in the lower panel. *(From MJ Aminoff: Electromyography in Clinical Practice: Electrodiagnostic Aspects of Neuromuscular Disease, 3rd ed. New York, Churchill Livingstone, 1998.)*

permits conduction velocity to be determined in the fastest conducting motor fibers between the points of stimulation. The latency and amplitude of the electrical response of muscle (i.e., of the compound muscle action potential) to stimulation of its motor nerve at a distal site are also compared with values defined in normal subjects. Sensory nerve conduction studies are performed by determining the conduction velocity and amplitude of action potentials in sensory fibers when these fibers are stimulated at one point and the responses are recorded at another point along the course of the nerve. In adults, conduction velocity in the arms is normally between 50 and 70 m/s, and in the legs is between 40 and 60 m/s.

Nerve conduction studies complement the EMG examination, enabling the presence and extent of peripheral nerve pathology to be determined. They are particularly helpful in determining whether sensory symptoms are arising from pathology proximal or distal to the dorsal root ganglia (in the former instance, peripheral sensory conduction studies is normal) and whether neuromuscular dysfunction relates to peripheral nerve disease. In patients with a mononeuropathy, they are invaluable as a means of localizing a focal nerve lesion, determining the extent and severity of the underlying pathology, providing a guide to prognosis, and detecting subclinical involvement of other nerves. They enable a polyneuropathy to be distinguished from a mononeuropathy multiplex, which has important etiologic implications. Nerve conduction studies provide a means of following the progression and therapeutic response of peripheral nerve disorders and are used widely for this purpose in clinical trials. They may suggest the underlying pathologic basis in individual cases. Conduction velocity is often markedly slowed, terminal motor latencies are prolonged, and compound motor and sensory nerve action potentials may be dispersed in the demyelinative neuropathies (such as in Guillain-Barré syndrome, chronic inflammatory polyneuropathy, metachromatic leukodystrophy, or certain hereditary neuropathies); conduction block is frequent in acquired varieties of these neuropathies. By contrast, conduction velocity is normal or slowed only mildly, sensory nerve action potentials are small or absent, and there is EMG evidence of denervation in axonal neuropathies such as occur in association with metabolic or toxic disorders.

The utility and complementary role of EMG and nerve conduction studies are best illustrated by reference to a common clinical problem. Numbness and paresthesias of the little finger and associated wasting of the intrinsic muscles of the hand may result from a spinal cord lesion, C8/T1 radiculopathy, brachial plexopathy (lower trunk or medial cord), or a lesion of the ulnar nerve. If sensory nerve action potentials can be recorded normally at the wrist following stimulation of the digital fibers in the affected finger, the pathology is probably proximal to the dorsal root ganglia (i.e., there is a radiculopathy or more central lesion); absence of the sensory potentials, by contrast, suggests distal pathology. EMG examination will indicate whether the pattern of affected muscles conforms to radicular or ulnar nerve territory or is more extensive (thereby favoring a plexopathy). Ulnar motor conduction studies will generally also distinguish between a radiculopathy (normal findings) and ulnar neuropathy (abnormal findings) and will often identify the site of an ulnar nerve lesion. The nerve is stimulated at several points along its course to determine whether the compound action potential recorded from a distal muscle that it supplies shows a marked alteration in size or area or a disproportionate change in latency, with stimulation at a particular site. The electrophysiologic findings thus permit a definitive diagnosis to be made and specific treatment instituted in circumstances where there is clinical ambiguity.

F-WAVE STUDIES

Stimulation of a motor nerve causes impulses to travel antidromically (i.e., toward the spinal cord) as well as orthodromically (to the nerve terminals). Such antidromic impulses cause a few of the anterior horn cells to discharge, producing a small motor response that occurs considerably later than the direct response elicited by nerve stimulation. The F wave so elicited is sometimes abnormal (absent or delayed) with proximal pathology of the peripheral nervous system, such as a radiculopathy, and may therefore be helpful in detecting abnormalities when conventional nerve conduction studies are normal. In general, however, the clinical utility of F-wave studies has been disappointing, except perhaps in Guillain-Barré syndrome, where they are often absent or delayed.

H-REFLEX STUDIES

The H reflex is easily recorded only from the soleus muscle (S1) in normal adults. It is elicited by low-intensity stimulation of the tibial nerve and represents a monosynaptic reflex in which spindle (Ia) afferent fibers constitute the afferent arc and alpha motor axons the efferent pathway. The H reflexes are often absent bilaterally in elderly patients or with polyneuropathies and may be lost unilaterally in S1 radiculopathies.

MUSCLE RESPONSE TO REPETITIVE NERVE STIMULATION

The size of the electrical response of a muscle to supramaximal electrical stimulation of its motor nerve relates to the number of muscle fibers that are activated. Neuromuscular transmission can be tested by several different protocols, but the most helpful is to record with surface electrodes the electrical response of a muscle to supramaximal stimulation of its motor nerve by repetitive (2–3 Hz) shocks delivered before and at selected intervals after a maximal voluntary contraction.

There is normally little or no change in size of the muscle response to repetitive stimulation of a motor nerve at 2–3 Hz with stimuli delivered at intervals after voluntary contraction of the muscle for about 20–30 s, even though preceding activity in the junctional region influences the release of acetylcholine and thus the size of the end-plate potentials elicited by a test stimulus. This is because more acetylcholine is normally released than is required to bring the motor end-plate potentials to the threshold for generating muscle fiber action potentials. In disorders of neuromuscular transmission this safety