Clinical Policy: Facet Joint Interventions

Reference Number: WA.CP.MP.171
Last Review Date: 01/20

See Important Reminder at the end of this policy for important regulatory and legal information.

Description
Chronic low back pain is frequently attributed to disorders of the facet joint. Neck pain related to whiplash injury is also thought to be related to the cervical zygapophyseal facet joint. However, the diagnosis of facet joint pain is difficult and often is based on pain relief following a diagnostic pain block of the medial branch of the posterior rami of the spinal nerve supplying the facet joint.

Policy/Criteria
It is the policy of Coordinated Care of Washington, Inc., in accordance with the Health Care Authority’s Health Technology Assessment, that facet joint interventions are medically necessary when the relevant criteria are met.

I. Facet Joint Injections are considered medically necessary for the following indications:
   A. Up to two* controlled medial branch blocks/facet joint injections in the lumbar and cervical regions when all the following criteria are met:
      1. Injections are given at least 2 weeks apart;
      2. Intermittent or continuous back or neck pain that interferes with ADLs has lasted for ≥ 3 months;
      3. The member has failed to respond to conservative therapy including all of the following:
         a. ≥ 6 weeks chiropractic, physical therapy or prescribed home exercise program;
         b. NSAID ≥ 3 weeks or NSAID contraindicated or not tolerated;
         c. ≥ 6 weeks activity modification;
      3. Clinical findings suggest facet joint syndrome and imaging studies suggest no other obvious cause of the pain (e.g., disc herniation, radiculitis, discogenic or sacroiliac pain). Physical findings of spinal facet joint syndrome can include low back pain exacerbated on extension and rotation; positive response to facet loading maneuvers or pain worse at night;
      4. No more than three spinal levels (unilateral or bilateral) are to be treated at the same session.
   *Note: If the first controlled medial branch block/facet joint injection has < 75% pain relief, a second block is not medically necessary

II. Facet joint medial branch conventional radiofrequency neurotomy in the lumbar region is considered medically necessary for the following indications:
   A. Initial facet joint medial branch conventional radiofrequency neurotomy in the lumbar region is medically necessary when all of the following criteria are met:
1. Member is 18 years of age or older;
2. Chronic back pain is present;
3. There was a positive response to two diagnostic differential facet joint injections/medial branch block(s) (at each region to be treated), as indicated by ≥ 80% pain relief with the ability to perform prior painful movements without significant pain;
4. No more than two joints are to be treated at the same session.

B. *Repeat* facet joint medial branch conventional radiofrequency neurotomy in the lumbar region is considered **medically necessary** when all the following criteria are met:
1. At least 6 months have elapsed since the previous treatment;
2. Documented, clinically significant improvement in pain and/or function for six months before further neurotomy at any level;
3. No more than two joints are to be treated at the same session.

III. Facet joint medial branch conventional radiofrequency neurotomy in the *cervical region* is considered **medically necessary** for the following indications:

A. *Initial* facet joint medial branch conventional radiofrequency neurotomy in the cervical region is medically necessary when all of the following criteria are met:
1. C3-4 through C6-7, only;
2. Member is 18 years of age or older;
3. Chronic neck pain is present;
4. There was a positive response to two diagnostic differential facet joint injections/medial branch block(s) (at each region to be treated), as indicated by 100% pain relief;
5. No more than two joints are to be treated at the same session.

B. *Repeat* facet joint medial branch conventional radiofrequency neurotomy in the cervical region is considered **medically necessary** when all the following criteria are met:
1. At least 6 months have elapsed since the previous treatment;
2. Documented, clinically significant improvement in pain and/or function for six months before further neurotomy at any level;
3. No more than two joints are to be treated at the same session.

IV. **Conventional radiofrequency neurotomy of the facet joints of the thoracic region** is considered **not medically necessary** because effectiveness has not been established. There is a need for further well-designed, randomized controlled trials to evaluate effectiveness.

V. **Pulsed radiofrequency neurotomy of the facet joints** is considered **not medically necessary.** The available evidence on the effectiveness of pulsed radiofrequency in the treatment of patients with various chronic pain syndromes is largely based on retrospective, case series studies. Its clinical value needs to be examined in well-designed, randomized controlled trials with large sample size and long-term follow-up. Studies on pulsed radiofrequency ablation continue to be done.
VI. *Therapeutic facet joint injections* are considered **not medically necessary** because effectiveness has not been established.

**Background**

*Facet Joint Injection*

Patients referred for facet injections most often have degenerative disease of the facet joints. However, even if the facet joint appears radiologically normal, facet injections still may be of use as radiologically occult synovitis can cause facet pain, particularly in younger patients. Post laminectomy syndrome, or nonradicular pain occurring after laminectomy, is also an acceptable reason to perform facet injections.

The body of evidence for facet joint injection equivocally supports the use of corticosteroids or local anesthetic for low back pain of facet joint origin, but questions remain regarding long-term safety, patient selection criteria, and comparative effectiveness versus standard therapies. It is unclear whether improvements from facet joint injections last beyond three to six months.

Evidence is insufficient to support the use of facet joint injections for thoracic pain of facet joint origin, as only one randomized controlled trial has been conducted.

*Facet Joint Radiofrequency Neurotomy*

Based on the outcome of a facet joint nerve block, if the patient gets sufficient relief of pain but the pain recurs, one of the options is to denervate the facet joint. Radiofrequency neurotomy, also known as radiofrequency ablation, has been shown to temporarily reduce cervical and lumbar pain. Radiofrequency neurotomy involves delivering radio waves to targeted nerves via needles inserted through the skin. The heat created by the radio waves interferes with the nerves’ ability to transmit pain signals.

Evidence from several randomized controlled trials suggests that conventional radiofrequency neurotomy is either equivalent or superior to sham and other active treatments for low back pain of facet joint origin.

Few randomized controlled trials have evaluated pulsed radiofrequency neurotomy versus sham therapy, and have reached differing conclusions. Further research should be conducted to determine safety and efficacy of pulsed radiofrequency neurotomy for low back pain.

**Coding Implications**

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<th>CPT® Codes</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>0213T</td>
<td>Injection(s), diagnostic or therapeutic agent, paravertebral facet (zygapophyseal) joint (or nerves innervating that joint) with ultrasound guidance, cervical or thoracic; single level</td>
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<td>0214T</td>
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CPT® Codes | Description
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64636 | Destruction by neurolytic agent, paravertebral facet joint nerve(s), with imaging guidance (fluoroscopy or CT); lumbar or sacral, each additional facet joint (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)
64999 | Unlisted procedure, nervous system.

Reviews, Revisions, and Approvals

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<th>Policy</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<td>Policy developed.</td>
<td>08/19</td>
<td>11/19</td>
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<td>Revised wording of section I.A. to match corporate. No change to criteria. Updated reference.</td>
<td>01/20</td>
<td>03/20</td>
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References


Important Reminder

This clinical policy has been developed by appropriately experienced and licensed health care professionals based on a review and consideration of currently available generally accepted standards of medical practice; peer-reviewed medical literature; government agency/program approval status; evidence-based guidelines and positions of leading national health professional organizations; views of physicians practicing in relevant clinical areas affected by this clinical policy; and other available clinical information. The Health Plan makes no representations and accepts no liability with respect to the content of any external information used or relied upon in developing this clinical policy. This clinical policy is consistent with standards of medical practice current at the time that this clinical policy was approved. “Health Plan” means a health plan that has adopted this clinical policy and that is operated or administered, in whole or in part, by Centene Management Company, LLC, or any of such health plan’s affiliates, as applicable.

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