

Use of Imaging Studies for Low Back Pain

This quick reference guide applies to our Medicaid, Ambetter (Marketplace) and Allwell (Medicare) products.



MEASURE DESCRIPTION

Assesses the percentage of adults ages 18 - 50 with a primary diagnosis of low back pain who did NOT have an imaging study (plain X-ray, MRI, CT scan) within 28 days of the diagnosis.

Exclusions: Cancer, recent trauma, intravenous drug abuse, neurologic impairment, HIV, spinal infection, major organ transplant, prolonged use of corticosteroids.



WHY IT MATTERS

Almost 75 percent of adults will experience low back pain at some time during their life, and each year 2.5 million will visit outpatient clinic settings for low back pain. The majority of persons who experience severe low back pain will have pain improvement within the first two weeks of onset. Unnecessary or routine imaging (x-ray, MRI, CT scans) for low back pain is not associated with improved outcomes. Avoidance of imaging for patients when there is no indication of an underlying condition can prevent unnecessary harm and unintended consequences to patients and can reduce health care costs.



SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE HEDIS SCORES

- Avoid imaging for patients in the first 28 days of care for low back pain unless clinically indicated, such as in instances of loss of feeling, weakness or numbness in the lower limbs, fever, weight loss, incontinence, or conditions in the exclusions section, noted above.
- Education for the patient is key. Provide alternative treatment options, such as to avoid bedrest and remain as active as possible, application of cold or heat, NSAIDs or muscle relaxants, physical therapy and massage therapy.
- Document and code for all services provided for each encounter. Telehealth visits are appropriate for capturing the episode and diagnosis code for this measure. Use NCQA specified codes to close the care gap.

Uncomplicated Low Back Pain	ICD-10CM: Over 250 codes are acceptable. An example is M54.5, low back pain.
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Reflects NCQA HEDIS® 2020 Technical Specifications