Policy Statement

Indications for Facet Joint Injections or Medial Branch Nerve Blocks:
- To confirm disabling non-radicular low back (lumbosacral), mid back (thoracic) or neck (cervical) pain*, suggestive of facet joint origin as documented in the medical record based upon all of the following:
  - History, consisting of mainly axial or non-radicular pain; AND
  - Lack of evidence, either for discogenic or sacroiliac joint pain; AND
  - Lack of disc herniation or evidence of radiculitis; AND
  - Facet blocks should not be performed at same levels as previous surgical fusion; AND
  - Intermittent or continuous pain with average pain levels of ≥ 6 on a scale of 0 to 10 or functional disability prior to each injection, including each unilateral facet block; AND
  - Duration of pain of at least 2 months; AND
  - Failure to respond to active conservative non-operative therapy management for a minimum of 6 weeks in the last 6 months prior to facet injections unless the medical reason this treatment cannot be done is clearly documented.
- All procedures must be performed using fluoroscopic or CT guidance.

NOTE: Ultrasound guidance is not a covered benefit and procedure performed using ultrasound guidance are not reimbursable.

Frequency of Facet Block:
- There must be a minimum of 14 days between injections.
- There must be a positive response of ≥ 50% pain relief or improved ability to function. The patient is actively engaged in other forms of active conservative non-operative treatment if the patient is receiving therapeutic facet joint injections unless pain prevents the patient from participating in conservative therapy*).
- Maximum of 3 procedures per region every 6 months. (NOTE: Unilateral facet blocks performed at the same level on the right vs. left within 2 weeks of each other would be considered as one procedure.)
- If the procedures are applied for different regions, they may be performed at intervals of no sooner than 2 weeks for most types of procedures.
- Maximum of 3 levels injected on same date of service.
- Radiofrequency neurolysis procedures should be considered in patients with positive facet blocks (with at least 50% pain relief and/or improved ability to function, but with insufficient sustained relief (less than 2-3 months improvement).

Contraindications for Facet Joint Injections:
- History of allergy to contrast administration, local anesthetics, steroids, or other drugs potentially utilized;
- Hypovolemia;
- Infection over puncture site;
- Bleeding disorders or coagulopathy;
- History of allergy to medications to be administered;
- Inability to obtain percutaneous access to the target facet joint;
- Progressive neurological disorder which may be masked by the procedure;
- Pregnancy;
- Spinal infection; OR
- Acute Fracture
**Policy Guidelines**

*Conservative Therapy: (spine) should include a multimodality approach consisting of a combination of active and inactive components. Inactive components, such as rest, ice, heat, modified activities, medical devices, acupuncture and/or stimulators, medications, injections (epidural, facet, bursal and/or joint, not including trigger point), and diathermy can be utilized. Active modalities may consist of physical therapy, a physician supervised home exercise program**, and/or chiropractic care.

**Home Exercise Program - (HEP) – the following two elements are required to meet guidelines for completion of conservative therapy:

- Information provided on exercise prescription/plan AND
- Follow up with member with documentation provided regarding completion of HEP, (after suitable 4-6 week period) or inability to complete HEP due to physical reason i.e. increased pain, inability to physically perform exercises. (Patient inconvenience or noncompliance without explanation does not constitute “inability to complete” HEP).

Terminology: Facet Injections; Facet Joint Blocks; Paravertebral Facet Injections; Paravertebral Facet Joint Injections; Paravertebral Facet Joint Nerve Injections; Zygapophyseal injections; Lumbar Facet Blockade; Medial Branch blocks

**Description**

Facet joints (also called zygapophysial joints or z-joints), posterior to the vertebral bodies in the spinal column and connecting the vertebral bodies to each other, are located at the junction of the inferior articular process of a more cephalad vertebra and the superior articular process of a more caudal vertebra. These joints provide stability and enable movement, allowing the spine to bend, twist, and extend in different directions. They also restrict hyperextension and hyperflexion.

**Related Policies**

- N/A

**Benefit Application**

Benefit determinations should be based in all cases on the applicable contract language. To the extent there are any conflicts between these guidelines and the contract language, the contract language will control. Please refer to the member’s contract benefits in effect at the time of service to determine coverage or non-coverage of these services as it applies to an individual member.

Some state or federal mandates [e.g., Federal Employee Program (FEP)] prohibits plans from denying Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved technologies as investigational. In these instances, plans may have to consider the coverage eligibility of FDA-approved technologies on the basis of medical necessity alone.

**Regulatory Status**

- N/A
**Rationale**

Facet joints are clinically important spinal pain generators in patients with chronic spinal pain. In patients with chronic low back pain, facet joints have been implicated as a cause of the pain in 15% to 45% of patients. Facet joints are considered as the cause of chronic spinal pain in 48% of patients with thoracic pain and 54% to 67% of patients with chronic neck pain. Facet joints may refer pain to adjacent structures, making the underlying diagnosis difficult as referred pain may assume a pseudoradicular pattern. Lumbar facet joints may refer pain to the back, buttocks, and lower extremities while cervical facet joints may refer pain to the head, neck and shoulders.

Imaging findings are of little value in determining the source and location of ‘facet joint syndrome’, a term originally used by Ghormley and referring to back pain caused by pathology at the facet joints. Imaging studies may detect changes in facet joint architecture, but correlation between radiologic findings and symptoms is unreliable. Although clinical signs are also unsuitable for diagnosing facet joint-mediated pain, they may be of value in selecting patients for controlled local anesthetic blocks of either the medial branches or the facet joint itself.

Medical necessity management for paravertebral facet injections includes an initial evaluation including history and physical examination and a psychosocial and functional assessment. The following must be determined: nature of the suspected organic problem; non-responsiveness to conservative treatment*; level of pain and functional disability; conditions which may be contraindications to paravertebral facet injections; and responsiveness to prior interventions.

The most common source of chronic pain is the spine and about two-thirds of the U.S. population suffers from spinal pain sometime during their life span. Facet joint interventions are used in the treatment of pain in certain patients with a confirmed diagnosis of facet joint pain. Interventions include intraarticular injections and medial branch nerve blocks in the lumbar, cervical and thoracic spine. Prior to performing this procedure, shared decision-making between patient and physician must occur, and patient must understand the procedure and its potential risks and results. Facet joint injections or medial branch nerve blocks require guidance imaging.

**References**


Documentation for Clinical Review

Please provide the following documentation (if/when requested):
- History and physical and/or consultation notes including:
  - Diagnosis, history and duration of pain
  - Duration and response to conservative therapy (specify type)
  - Previous injection(s) (if applicable) including: date(s), type(s), location(s)/level(s), and responses
  - Treatment plan
- Injection(s) planned or performed including:
  - Location(s)/Level(s)
  - Type of injection (i.e., facet joint injection or block, diagnostic, therapeutic) and type of injectate solution(s)
  - Whether intravenous (IV) sedation/narcotic analgesia/monitored anesthesia care (MAC) is planned or used (if applicable)
  - Type of imaging guidance (i.e., fluoroscopy)
  - Radiology report(s)

Post Service
- Procedure report(s) including: description and procedure effects

Coding

This Policy relates only to the services or supplies described herein. Benefits may vary according to benefit design; therefore, contract language should be reviewed before applying the terms of the Policy. Inclusion or exclusion of a procedure, diagnosis or device code(s) does not constitute or imply member coverage or provider reimbursement.

MN/IE
The following services may be considered medically necessary in certain instances and investigational in others. Services may be considered medically necessary when policy criteria are met. Services may be considered investigational when the policy criteria are not met or when the code describes application of a product in the position statement that is investigational.

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HCPCS
- None

ICD-10 Procedure
- None

ICD-10 Diagnosis
- All Diagnoses

Policy History

This section provides a chronological history of the activities, updates and changes that have occurred with this Medical Policy.
Effective Date | Action | Reason
--- | --- | ---
01/01/2017 | Adoption of National Imaging Associates (NIA) Clinical Guidelines | Medical Policy Committee

**Definitions of Decision Determinations**

**Medically Necessary:** A treatment, procedure, or drug is medically necessary only when it has been established as safe and effective for the particular symptoms or diagnosis, is not investigational or experimental, is not being provided primarily for the convenience of the patient or the provider, and is provided at the most appropriate level to treat the condition.

**Investigational/Experimental:** A treatment, procedure, or drug is investigational when it has not been recognized as safe and effective for use in treating the particular condition in accordance with generally accepted professional medical standards. This includes services where approval by the federal or state governmental is required prior to use, but has not yet been granted.

**Split Evaluation:** Blue Shield of California/Blue Shield of California Life & Health Insurance Company (Blue Shield) policy review can result in a split evaluation, where a treatment, procedure, or drug will be considered to be investigational for certain indications or conditions, but will be deemed safe and effective for other indications or conditions, and therefore potentially medically necessary in those instances.

**Prior Authorization Requirements (as applicable to your plan)**

Within five days before the actual date of service, the provider must confirm with Blue Shield that the member's health plan coverage is still in effect. Blue Shield reserves the right to revoke an authorization prior to services being rendered based on cancellation of the member's eligibility. Final determination of benefits will be made after review of the claim for limitations or exclusions.

Questions regarding the applicability of this policy should be directed to the Prior Authorization Department. Please call (800) 541-6652 or visit the provider portal at www.blueshieldca.com/provider.

Disclaimer: This medical policy is a guide in evaluating the medical necessity of a particular service or treatment. Blue Shield of California may consider published peer-reviewed scientific literature, national guidelines, and local standards of practice in developing its medical policy. Federal and state law, as well as contract language, including definitions and specific contract provisions/exclusions, take precedence over medical policy and must be considered first in determining covered services. Member contracts may differ in their benefits. Blue Shield reserves the right to review and update policies as appropriate.