CareSource

MEDICAL POLICY STATEMENT
Marketplace

Policy Name & Number	Date Effective
Epidural Steroid Injections-MP-MM-1359	03/01/2026 IN, OH, WV inactive as of 01/01/2027
Policy Type	
MEDICAL	

Medical Policy Statements are developed from a review of the available evidence-based, clinical information based on and supported by clinical guidelines from medical specialties, peer-reviewed medical and scientific studies, nationally recognized utilization and technology assessment guidelines, and other medical management industry standards to aid in determining the medical necessity of a service. Medically necessary services are defined in the plan-specific Evidence of Coverage, Member Handbooks, Provider Manuals, Medical Policy Statements, and/or other plan policies and procedures.

Medical Policy Statements do not guarantee an authorization or payment of services. Please refer to the plan contract (e.g., Evidence of Coverage, Member Handbook) for the service(s) referenced in the Medical Policy Statement. Except as otherwise required by law, if there is a conflict between the Medical Policy Statement and the plan contract and/or provider agreement, then the plan contract and/or provider agreement will be the controlling document. Reasonable discretion may be used in interpreting and applying this Policy Statement to services provided in a particular case, and the policy may be modified at any time. Medical Policy Statements may be superseded by federal and state laws and regulations, as applicable. In the case of a discrepancy between the Policy Statement's effective date and any applicable legal or regulatory requirement, the law or regulation will govern.

Coverage for mental health and substance use disorder (MH/SUD) benefits are provided at the same level as coverage for medical and surgical (M/S) benefits, as required by the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act (MHPAEA). MH/SUD benefits are not subject to limits or requirements that are more restrictive than those that apply to M/S benefits.

This policy applies to the following Marketplace(s):			
☒ **Georgia**	☒ **Indiana**	☒ **Ohio**	☒ **West Virginia**

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A. Subject

Epidural Steroid Injections

B. Background

Nearly 84% of adults experience back pain during their lifetime. Long-term outcomes are largely favorable for most patients, but a small percentage of patients' symptoms are persistent. Persistent pain is categorized as subacute when lasting between 4 and 12 weeks and chronic when persisting for at least 3 months.

Comprehensive pain management care plans are most effective in managing patient's chronic pain. These plans focus on a person-centered approach and incorporate conservative treatment with other modalities. These multidisciplinary treatments include promoting patient self-management and aim to reduce the impact of pain on a patient's daily life, even if the pain cannot be relieved completely. In addition to conservative therapy, additional treatment options may include nonpharmacologic or pharmacologic treatments, nonsurgical interventions, and surgical interventions. Interventional procedures for the management of pain unresponsive to conservative treatment should be provided only by physicians qualified to deliver these health services.

Epidural steroid injections (ESIs) are a nonsurgical, minimally invasive intervention for chronic back pain. ESIs may be administered through the translaminar approach (via the interlaminar space in the spine), the transforaminal approach (through the neuroforamen dorsal to the nerve root), or the caudal approach (through the sacral hiatus at the sacral canal). There is conflicting evidence on the efficacy of ESIs and a lack of consensus on frequency and number of epidural steroid injections from professional organizations. However, clinical experience suggests that some patients obtain more significant relief, making it reasonable to offer a trial of steroid injections when conservative management has failed.

Imaging studies of the symptomatic region may be performed to evaluate suspected specific causes of spinal pain (eg, herniated disc, spinal stenosis, degenerative vertebral disease, rule out fracture or tumor). However, evidence does not support the routine use of imaging or other diagnostic tests in patients with nonspecific back pain. Diagnostic imaging and testing are only recommended when severe or progressive neurologic deficits are present or when serious underlying conditions are suspected on the basis of history and physical examination.

C. Definitions

- **Conservative Therapy** – A multimodality plan of care including both active and inactive conservative therapies.
  - **Active Conservative Therapies** – Actions or activities that strengthen muscle groups and target key spinal structures, including physical therapy, occupational therapy, a physician supervised home exercise program (HEP), and/or chiropractic care.

        - **HEP** – A 6-week program requiring an exercise prescription and/or plan and a follow-up documented in the medical record after completion, or documentation of the inability to complete the HEP due to a stated physical reason (ie, increased pain, inability to physically perform exercises). Patient inconvenience or noncompliance without explanation does not constitute an inability to complete.
    - **Inactive Conservative Therapies** – Passive activities by the patient that aid in treating symptoms associated with pain, including rest, ice, heat, medical devices, TENS use, and/or pharmacotherapy (prescription or over the counter [eg, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, acetaminophen]).
        - **Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulator (TENS)** – A device that utilizes electrical current delivered through electrodes placed on the surface of the skin to decrease the patient's perception of pain by inhibiting the transmission of afferent pain nerve impulses and/or stimulating the release of endorphins. Its use, frequency, duration, and start dates must be documented in the medical record to be considered part of conservative therapy during the period of prior authorization request.
- **Epidural Steroid Injection** – Administration of steroids via a needle inserted in the space between the ligamentum flavum and the dura and administered by translaminar, transforaminal, or caudal approaches. Injections are intended to cause a short-term reduction in pain in the affected region.

D. Policy

I. Epidural steroid injections for labor and delivery in childbirth or post-surgical pain do not require medical necessity review.

II. Initial (Diagnostic) Injection
CareSource considers an initial (diagnostic) epidural steroid injection (maximum of 2 injections) medically necessary for the management of chronic back pain when **ALL** the following clinical criteria are met:

A. Pain is located in either the cervical, thoracic, or lumbar spine and is predominantly radiating or shooting in nature.
B. Pain is causing functional disability (at least a 6 on a scale of 0 to 10).
C. Signs or symptoms are consistent with radiculopathy, as indicated by at least 1 of the following:
    1. diminished or absent deep tendon reflexes
    2. paresthesia, numbness, sensory change, or weakness in dermatomal distribution
    3. positive femoral nerve stretch test
    4. positive Spurling test
    5. positive straight leg raising test
D. Conservative therapy has failed to alleviate symptoms, as evidenced by **ALL** the following:
    1. documentation in the medical record of at least 6 weeks of active conservative therapy (see definition above) within the past 6 months OR

inability to complete active conservative therapy due to contraindication, increased pain, or intolerance
2. documentation in the medical record of at least 6 weeks of inactive conservative therapy (see definition above) within the past 6 months

E. Imaging (eg, x-ray, CT, MRI), if performed, demonstrates that there are no conditions present that would preclude the safety of the performance of the procedure.

III. Subsequent (Therapeutic) Injections
CareSource considers therapeutic epidural steroid injections medically necessary when **ALL** the following criteria are met:
A. The diagnostic or last therapeutic injection for current episode of pain provided significant functional pain relief of at least 50% as measured by a significant decrease in pain level, decrease in pain medications, and/or increase in physical function.
B. The member continues to have ongoing pain or documented functional disability (at least a 6 on a scale of 0 to 10).
C. At least 3 weeks have passed since the prior injection in order to reach pharmacodynamic effect.
D. No more than 3 procedures in a 12-week period of time per region are considered medically necessary.
E. The member continues to engage in conservative therapy (see definition above).

IV. Limitations and Exclusions
A. The maximum number of all epidural injections a member can receive in 12 months is 6, regardless of the number of levels involved.
B. For interlaminar or caudal epidural injections, no more than 1 epidural injection per treatment date should be performed.
C. For transforaminal epidurals or selective nerve root blocks (SNRBs), no more than 2 vertebral levels per treatment date, whether unilateral or bilateral, should be performed.
D. Real-time image guidance and any injection of contrast are inclusive components of epidural injections and are not compensated for separately or unbundled for coverage.
E. Conscious sedation, if required for co-morbidities or patient/physician preference, may be provided without a medical necessity review but services will be considered part of the procedure and are not eligible for additional reimbursement if administered by a second provider.
F. Monitored anesthesia is considered not medically necessary.
G. Patients with indwelling implanted spinal cord stimulators or pain pumps must have a device interrogation report and an interpretation submitted with medical records and included in the prior authorization request for proposed interventional pain injections. If a device is not functioning properly, an escalation in pain may warrant evaluation and management of the implanted device.

H. Clinical evaluations and care of candidate patients for epidural injections should also address, at the discretion of the physician and according to prevailing standards of medical care:
   1. no acute spinal cord compression
   2. selected body imaging evaluations to evaluate the area of pain, particularly for acute pain, or to evaluate escalations in chronic baseline pain
   3. appropriate imaging to rule out red flag conditions may be indicated if potential issues of trauma, osteomyelitis or malignancy, or other diagnoses are a concern

I. Contraindications include any of the following:
   1. pain related to cancer etiology
   2. local or systemic infection
   3. cauda equina syndrome
   4. spinal trauma (eg, hematoma, hemorrhage, mass, ischemia)
   5. coagulopathy

V. Inconclusive or Non-Supportive Evidence

A. Evidence reported in the medical literature is inconclusive as to the use of epidural injections for long term relief or treatment of chronic pain. Long-term continuation (epidural injections beyond 1 year) may be subject to medical necessity review.

B. For both cervical and lumbar transforaminal (TF) ESIs, using particulate steroid is associated with a rare risk of catastrophic neurovascular complications such as stroke or death. Cervical transforaminal injections are risky because arterial supply may be densely concentrated in and around the intervertebral foramen. TF ESIs can be performed without contrast in patients with documented contraindication to its use. In these circumstances, particulate steroids are contraindicated and only the preservative free, particulate free steroids which are available should be used.

C. Cervical transforaminal ESIs have sparse literature for cervical radicular pain, and, if performed, should be performed by injecting contrast medium under real-time fluoroscopy and/or digital subtraction angiography (DSA) in a frontal plane, before injecting any substance potentially hazardous to the patient. Particulate steroids should not be used for cervical TF injections as per the contraindication established by the FDA warning.

E. State-Specific Information

NA

F. Conditions of Coverage

NA

G. Related Policies/Rules

NA

H. Review/Revision History

	DATE	ACTION
Date Issued	12/14/2022	New policy
Date Revised	03/15/2023	Annual review: reorganized criteria, simplified conservative therapy, added provocation tests, added pain scale to diagnostic injection criteria. Approved at Committee.
	01/31/2024	Annual review: updated references, approved at Committee.
	01/15/2025	Review: removed US limitation, updated references, approved at Committee.
	12/03/2025	Review: updated references, approved at Committee.
Date Effective	03/01/2026	
Date Archived		

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