CareSource

MEDICAL POLICY STATEMENT
Wisconsin Marketplace

Policy Name & Number	Date Effective
Epidural Steroid Injections-WI MP-MM-1615	11/01/2026
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 Medical Policy Statements may be superseded by federal and state laws and regulations, as applicable.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.

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A. Subject
Epidural Steroid Injections

B. Background
Over 80% 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 a 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 providers 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.

This policy focuses on ESIs as an intervention for chronic back pain management and does not apply to labor and delivery or surgical anesthesia.

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 provider supervised home exercise program (HEP), and/or chiropractic care.
    - **HEP** – A prescribed plan that includes specific goals, frequency, and expected duration, along with a clearly defined timeframe for reassessment (eg, 6 – 12 weeks). Ongoing continuation must be supported by documented clinical progress. 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, Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulator (TENS) use, and/or pharmacotherapy (prescription or over the counter [eg, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, acetaminophen]).
- **Epidural Steroid Injection** – Administration of steroids via a needle inserted in the epidural space of the spine. Injections are intended to cause a short-term reduction in pain in the affected region.

D. Policy

I. Initial (Diagnostic) Injection

Initial (diagnostic) epidural steroid injection (maximum of 2 injections) are considered medically necessary for the management of subacute or chronic 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 moderate to severe functional impairment (at least a 6 on a scale of 0 to 10) as documented by provider.
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's test
    5. positive straight leg raise test
D. Conservative therapy has failed to alleviate symptoms, as evidenced by **ALL** the following:
    1. documentation in the medical record of at least 4 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 4 weeks of inactive conservative therapy (see definition above) within the past 6 months
E. Imaging (eg, x-ray, CT, MRI), if performed, demonstrates a spinal abnormality correlating with clinical symptoms and that there are no conditions present that would preclude the safety of the performance of the procedure.

II. Subsequent (Therapeutic) Injections
Therapeutic epidural steroid injections are considered 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 impairment (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).

III. 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 member/provider 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. ESI injectates other than anesthetic, corticosteroid, and/or contrast agent (eg, biologics) are considered experimental and investigational.
G. Monitored anesthesia is considered not medically necessary.
H. Nerve blocks used as part of a surgical procedure or other medical procedure are not separately reimbursable but an inclusive component of that procedure. These injections will not be compensated separately or unbundled for coverage.
I. Members 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.
J. Clinical evaluations and care of candidate members for epidural injections should also address, at the discretion of the provider and according to prevailing standards of medical care:
1. selected body imaging evaluations to evaluate the area of pain, particularly for acute pain, or to evaluate escalations in chronic baseline pain

2. 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

K. Contraindications include any of the following:
1. pain related to cancer etiology
2. local or systemic infection
3. spinal trauma (eg, hematoma, hemorrhage, mass, ischemia)
4. coagulopathy or high risk of bleeding (eg, advanced liver disease, advanced renal disease)

IV. 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. Evidence supporting cervical TF ESIs for cervical radicular pain is limited. If performed, cervical TF ESIs 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. Due to safety concerns identified in FDA warnings and subsequent expert consensus recommendations, particulate steroids should not be used for cervical TF injections.

E. Conditions of Coverage

NA

F. Related Policies/Rules

Facet Joint Interventions
Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulators
Trigger Point Injections

G. Review/Revision History

	DATE	ACTION
Date Issued	08/14/2024	New policy. Approved at Committee.
Date Revised	01/15/2024 09/10/2025 12/03/2025 08/12/2026	Review: removed US limitation, updated references, approved at Committee. Review: updated logo, changed physician to provider, approved at Committee. Review: updated references, approved at Committee. Review: updated HEP definition, clarified injections as part of a surgical procedure, changed 6 weeks of conservative therapy to 4 and added biologics exclusion. Approved at Committee
Date Effective	11/01/2026	
Date Archived		

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