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OVERVIEW

Surface electromyography (SEMG), a noninvasive procedure that records the summation of muscle electrical activity, has been investigated as a technique to evaluate the physiologic functioning of the back. In addition, this procedure has been studied as a technique to evaluate abnormal patterns of electrical activity in the paraspinal muscles in patients with back pain symptoms, such as spasm, tenderness, limited range of motion, or postural disorders.

MEDICAL CRITERIA

Not Applicable

PRIOR AUTHORIZATION

Not Applicable

POLICY STATEMENT

Medicare Advantage Plans

Paraspinal surface electromyography to evaluate and monitor back pain is considered not covered as the evidence is insufficient to determine the effects of the technology on health outcomes.

Commercial Products

Paraspinal surface electromyography to evaluate and monitor back pain is considered not medically necessary as the evidence is insufficient to determine the effects of the technology on health outcomes.

COVERAGE

Medicare Advantage Plans and Commercial Products

Benefits vary between groups and contracts. Please refer to the appropriate Benefit Booklet, Evidence of Coverage or Subscriber Agreement for applicable not medically necessary/not covered benefits/coverage.

BACKGROUND

Back pain is a common condition that affects most individuals at some point in their lives. Identifying the pathogenesis of back pain is challenging, in part due to the complex anatomy of the back, which includes vertebrae, intervertebral discs, facet joints, spinal nerve roots, and numerous muscles. Back pain may be related to osteoarthritis, disc disease, spondylosis, or muscular pathologies, such as muscle strain or spasm. Moreover, due to referred pain patterns, the location of the pain may not be anatomically related to the pathogenesis of the pain. For example, buttock or leg pain may be related to pathology in the spine. In addition to the diagnostic challenges of back pain is the natural history of acute back pain.

Aside from physical examination, diagnostic testing includes imaging technologies, such as magnetic resonance imaging, designed to identify pathology (eg, bulging discs), or tests such as discography to localize the abnormality by reproducing the pain syndrome. However, these tests lack specificity and must be carefully interpreted in the context of the clinical picture. For example, magnetic resonance imaging identifies 5% of asymptomatic patients as having bulging discs. However, the presence of a bulging disc may only be clinically significant if correlated with other symptoms. Assessment of the musculature may focus on a range of motion or strength exercises.

In contrast to anatomic imaging, surface electromyography (SEMG), which records the summation of muscle activity from groups of muscles, has been investigated as a technique to evaluate the physiologic functioning of the back. A noninvasive procedure, SEMG differs from needle electromyography, an invasive procedure in which the electrical activity of individual muscles is recorded. Paraspinal SEMG has been explored to evaluate abnormal patterns of electrical activity in the paraspinal muscles in patients with back pain symptoms such as spasm, tenderness, limited range of motion, or postural disorders. The technique is performed using a single or an array of electrodes placed on the skin surface, with recordings made at rest, in various positions, or after a series of exercises. Recordings can also be made by using a handheld device, which is applied to the skin at different sites. Electrical activity is assessed by computer analysis of the frequency spectrum (ie, spectral analysis), amplitude, or root mean square of the electrical action potentials. In particular, a spectral analysis that focuses on the median frequency has been used to assess paraspinal muscle fatigue during isometric endurance exercises. Paraspinal SEMG has been researched as a technique to establish the etiology of back pain and has been used to monitor the response to therapy and establish physical activity limits, such as assessing capacity to lift heavy objects or ability to return to work.

Paraspinal SEMG is an office-based procedure that may be most commonly used by physiatrists or chiropractors. The following clinical applications of the paraspinal SEMG have been proposed:

- clarification of diagnosis (ie, muscle, joint, or disc disease)
- selection of a course of medical therapy
- selection of a type of physical therapy
- preoperative evaluation
- postoperative rehabilitation
- follow-up of acute low back pain
- evaluation of exacerbation of chronic low back pain
- evaluation of pain management treatment techniques.

Most cases of acute low back pain resolve with conservative therapy (eg, physical therapy) while continuing normal activities within limits permitted by the pain. Therefore, initial imaging or other diagnostic testing is generally not recommended unless “red flag” warning signs are present or the pain persists for more than 4 to 6 weeks. Red flag findings include significant trauma, history of cancer, unrelenting night pain, fevers or chills, and progressive motor or sensory deficits.

There is inadequate data on the technical and diagnostic performance of paraspinal surface electromyography (SEMG) compared with a criterion standard reference test. Moreover, there is insufficient evidence regarding how findings from paraspinal SEMG impact patient management and/or how use of the test improves health outcomes. Thus, paraspinal surface electromyography for diagnosing and monitoring back pain is considered not medically necessary.

CODING

Medicare Advantage Plans

The following HCPCS code is specific to a surface EMG and is not covered

S3900: Surface electromyography (EMG).

Commercial Products:

The following HCPCS code is specific to a surface EMG and is not medically necessary

S3900: Surface electromyography (EMG).

RELATED POLICIES

None

PUBLISHED

Provider Update, September 2021

Provider Update, August 2020
Provider Update, September 2019
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Provider Update, September 2017

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