

**Medical Coverage Policy | Ophthalmologic**  
Techniques that Evaluate the Posterior Segment for  
Glaucoma



**EFFECTIVE DATE:** 01|01|2017  
**POLICY LAST UPDATED:** 04|07|2021

### OVERVIEW

Several techniques have been developed to measure the thickness of the optic nerve and retinal nerve fiber layer (RNFL) as a method to diagnose and monitor glaucoma. Measurement of ocular blood flow is also being evaluated as a diagnostic tool for glaucoma.

This policy is applicable to Commercial Products only. For Medicare Advantage Plans, see Related Policies section.

### MEDICAL CRITERIA

Not applicable

### PRIOR AUTHORIZATION

#### Commercial Products

Prior authorization review is not required.

### POLICY STATEMENT

#### Commercial Products

Analysis of the optic nerve (retinal nerve fiber layer) in the diagnosis and evaluation of patients with glaucoma or glaucoma suspects may be considered medically necessary when using scanning laser ophthalmoscopy, scanning laser polarimetry, and optical coherence tomography.

The measurement of ocular blood flow, pulsatile ocular blood flow, or blood flow velocity is considered not medically necessary in the diagnosis and follow-up of patients with glaucoma as the evidence is the evidence is sufficient to determine that the technology results in improvement in the net health outcome.

### COVERAGE

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

### BACKGROUND

Glaucoma is characterized by degeneration of the optic nerve (optic disc). Elevated intraocular pressure (IOP) has long been thought to be the primary etiology, but the relationship between IOP and optic nerve damage varies among patients, suggesting a multifactorial origin. For example, some patients with clearly elevated IOP will show no optic nerve damage, while others with marginal or no pressure elevation will show optic nerve damage. The association between glaucoma and other vascular disorders, such as diabetes or hypertension, suggests vascular factors may play a role in glaucoma. Specifically, it has been hypothesized that reductions in blood flow to the optic nerve may contribute to the visual field defects associated with glaucoma.

### Diagnosis and Management

A comprehensive ophthalmologic exam is required for the diagnosis of glaucoma, but no single test is adequate for establishing the diagnosis. A comprehensive ophthalmologic examination includes assessment of the optic nerve, evaluation of visual fields, and measurement of ocular pressure. The presence of

characteristic changes in the optic nerve or abnormalities in visual field, together with increased IOP, is sufficient for a definitive diagnosis. However, some patients will show ophthalmologic evidence of glaucoma with normal IOPs. These cases of normal tension glaucoma (NTG) are considered to be a type of primary open-angle glaucoma (POAG). Angle-closure glaucoma is another type of glaucoma associated with an increase in IOP. The increased IOP in angle-closure glaucoma arises from a reduction in aqueous outflow from the eye due to a closed angle in the anterior chamber.

Conventional management of patients with glaucoma principally involves drug therapy to control elevated IOPs, and serial evaluation of the optic nerve to follow disease progression. Standard methods of evaluation include careful direct examination of the optic nerve using ophthalmoscopy or stereophotography, or evaluation of visual fields. There is interest in developing more objective, reproducible techniques both to document optic nerve damage and to detect early changes in the optic nerve and RNFL before the development of permanent visual field deficits. Specifically, evaluating changes in the thickness of the RNFL has been investigated as a technique to diagnose and monitor glaucoma. However, IOP reduction is not effective in decreasing disease progression in a significant number of patients, and in patients with NTG, there is never an increase in IOP. It has been proposed that vascular dysregulation is a significant cause of damage to the RNFL, and there is interest in measuring ocular blood flow as both a diagnostic and a management tool for glaucoma. Changes in blood flow to the retina and choroid may be particularly relevant for diagnosis and treatment of NTG.

## **Techniques to Evaluate the Optic Nerve and RNFL**

### **Confocal Scanning Laser Ophthalmoscopy (CSLO)**

CSLO is an image acquisition technique intended to improve the quality of the eye examination compared with standard ophthalmologic examination. A laser is scanned across the retina along with a detector system. Only a single spot on the retina is illuminated at any time, resulting in a high-contrast image of great reproducibility that can be used to estimate the thickness of the RNFL. In addition, this technique does not require maximal mydriasis, which may be a problem in patients with glaucoma. The Heidelberg Retinal Tomograph is a commonly used technology.

### **Scanning Laser Polarimetry (SLP)**

The RNFL is a birefringent (or birefractive), meaning that it causes a change in the state of polarization of a laser beam as it passes. A 780-nm diode laser is used to illuminate the optic nerve. The polarization state of the light emerging from the eye is then evaluated and correlated with RNFL thickness. Unlike CSLO, SLP can directly measure the thickness of the RNFL. GDx<sup>®</sup> is a common SLP device. GDx contains a normative database and statistical software package that compare scan results with age-matched normal subjects of the same ethnic origin. The advantages of this system are that images can be obtained without pupil dilation, and evaluation can be completed in 10 minutes. Current instruments have added enhanced and variable corneal compensation technology to account for corneal polarization.

### **Optical Coherence Tomography (OCT)**

OCT uses near-infrared light to provide direct cross-sectional measurement of the RNFL. The principles employed are similar to those used in B-mode ultrasound except light, not sound, is used to produce the 2-dimensional images. The light source can be directed into the eye through a conventional slit-lamp biomicroscope and focused onto the retina through a typical 78-diopter lens. This system requires dilation of the patient's pupil. OCT analysis software is being developed to include optic nerve head parameters with spectral domain OCT, analysis of macular parameters, and hemodynamic parameters with Doppler OCT and OCT angiography.

### **Pulsatile Ocular Blood Flow**

The pulsatile variation in ocular pressure results from the flow of blood into the eye during cardiac systole. Pulsatile ocular blood flow can thus be detected by the continuous monitoring of IOP. The detected pressure

pulse can then be converted into a volume measurement using the known relation between ocular pressure and ocular volume. Pulsatile blood flow is primarily determined by the choroidal vessels, particularly relevant to patients with glaucoma, because the optic nerve is supplied in large part by choroidal circulation.

### **Techniques to Measure Ocular Blood Flow**

A number of techniques have been developed to assess ocular blood flow. They include laser speckle flowgraphy, color Doppler imaging, Doppler Fourier domain OCT, laser Doppler velocimetry, confocal scanning laser Doppler flowmetry, and retinal functional imaging.

#### ***Laser Speckle Flowgraphy***

Laser speckle is detected when a coherent light source such as laser light is dispersed from a diffusing surface such as retinal and choroidal vessels and the circulation of the optic nerve head. The varying patterns of light can be used to determine red blood cell velocity and retinal blood flow. However, due to differences in the tissue structure in different eyes, flux values cannot be used for comparisons between eyes. This limitation may be overcome by subtracting background choroidal blood flow results from the overall blood flow results in the region of interest.

#### ***Color Doppler Imaging***

Color Doppler imaging has also been investigated as a technique to measure the blood flow velocity in the retinal and choroidal arteries. This technique delivers ultrasound in pulsed Doppler mode with a transducer set on closed eyelids. The examination takes 30 to 40 minutes, and is most effective for the mean velocity of large ophthalmic vessels such as the ophthalmic artery, the central retinal artery, and the short posterior ciliary arteries. However, total blood flow cannot be determined with this technique, and imaging is highly dependent on probe placement.

#### ***Doppler Fourier Domain OCT***

Doppler Fourier domain OCT is a noncontact imaging technique that detects the intensity of the light scattered back from erythrocytes as they move in the vessels of the ocular tissue. This induces a frequency shift that represents the velocity of the blood in the ocular tissue.

#### ***Laser Doppler Velocimetry***

Laser Doppler velocimetry compares the frequency of reflected laser light from a moving particle to stationary tissue.

#### ***Confocal Scanning Laser Doppler Flowmetry***

Confocal scanning laser Doppler flowmetry combines laser Doppler flowmetry with confocal scanning laser tomography. Infrared laser light is used to scan the retina, and the frequency and amplitude of Doppler shifts are determined from the reflected light. Determinations of blood velocity and blood volume are used to compute the total blood flow and create a physical map of retinal flow values.

For individuals who have glaucoma or suspected glaucoma who receive imaging of the optic nerve and retinal nerve fiber layer, the evidence includes studies on diagnostic accuracy. Relevant outcomes are test accuracy, symptoms, morbid events, functional outcomes, and medication use. Confocal scanning laser ophthalmoscopy, scanning laser polarimetry, and optical coherence tomography can be used to evaluate the optic nerve and retinal nerve fiber layer in patients with glaucoma and suspected glaucoma. Numerous articles have described findings from patients with known and suspected glaucoma using confocal scanning laser ophthalmoscopy, scanning laser polarimetry, and optical coherence tomography. These studies have reported that abnormalities may be detected on these examinations before functional changes are noted. The literature and specialty society guidelines have indicated that optic nerve analysis using confocal scanning laser ophthalmoscopy, scanning laser polarimetry, and optical coherence tomography are established add-on tests that may be used to diagnose and manage patients with glaucoma and suspected glaucoma. These results are

often considered along with other findings to make diagnostic and therapeutic decisions about glaucoma care, including use of topical medication, monitoring, and surgery to lower intraocular pressure. Thus, accurate diagnosis of glaucoma would be expected to reduce the progression of glaucoma. The evidence is sufficient to determine that the technology results in improvement in the net health outcome.

For individuals who have glaucoma or suspected glaucoma who receive evaluation of ocular blood flow, the evidence includes association studies. Relevant outcomes are test accuracy, symptoms, morbid events, functional outcomes, and medication use. Techniques to measure ocular blood flow or ocular blood velocity are used to determine appropriate glaucoma treatment options. The data for these techniques remain limited. Literature reviews have not identified studies addressing whether these technologies improve diagnostic accuracy or whether they improve health outcomes in patients with glaucoma. Some have suggested that these parameters may inform understanding of the variability in visual field changes in patients with glaucoma, ie, they may help explain why patients with similar levels of intraocular pressure develop markedly different visual impairments. However, data on use of ocular blood flow, pulsatile ocular blood flow, and/or blood flow velocity are currently lacking. The evidence is insufficient to determine the technology results in an improvement in the net health outcome.

## **CODING**

### **Commercial Products**

The following CPT code is medically necessary when filed with the ICD-10 diagnosis codes below. Other indications are considered not medically necessary.

**92133** Scanning computerized ophthalmic diagnostic imaging, posterior segment, with interpretation and report, unilateral or bilateral; optic nerve

ICD-10 Diagnosis Code Range H40 - H42

The following CPT code is considered not medically necessary.

**0198T** Measurement of ocular blood flow by repetitive pressure sampling, with interpretation and report

## **RELATED POLICIES**

BlueCHiP for Medicare National and Local Coverage Determinations Policy

New Technology

Optical Coherence Tomography of the Anterior Eye Segment

## **PUBLISHED**

Provider Update, June 2021

Provider Update, June 2020

Provider Update, September 2019

Provider Update, November/December 2018

Provider Update, February 2018

Provider Update, January 2017

Provider Update, August 2015

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