

MEDICAL POLICY

Medical Policy Title	Facet Joint Injections/ Medial Branch Blocks
Policy Number	7.01.116
Current Effective Date	October 15, 2026
Next Review Date	June 2027

Our medical policies are guides to evaluate technologies or services for medical necessity. Criteria are established through the assessment of evidence based, peer-reviewed scientific literature, and national professional guidelines. Federal and state law(s), regulatory mandates and the member's subscriber contract language are considered first in the determination of a covered service.

(Link to [Product Disclaimer](#))

POLICY STATEMENT(S)

Diagnostic Facet Joint Injection/Medial Branch Nerve Block

- I. An initial diagnostic facet joint injection/medial branch nerve block is considered **medically appropriate**, when **ALL** the following criteria are met:
 - A. Performed to determine whether chronic cervical, thoracic, or lumbar pain is of facet joint origin;
 - B. Presence of predominantly axial cervical, thoracic, or lumbar pain from levels C2 - C3 to L5 - S1;
 - C. Pain has persisted for at least three (3) months;
 - D. In the past three (3) months, pain has persisted despite at least four (4) weeks of appropriate conservative treatment (e.g., physical therapy, chiropractic care, exercise, medications such as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs [NSAIDs] or analgesics). If conservative treatment is contraindicated, the reason(s) for contraindication(s) is/are required to be documented in the medical record;
 - E. Clinical findings and imaging studies suggest no other obvious cause of the cervical, thoracic, or lumbar axial pain (e.g., central spinal stenosis with neurogenic claudication/myelopathy, foraminal stenosis or disc herniation with concordant radicular pain/radiculopathy that has been treated, infection, tumor, fracture, pseudoarthrosis, pain related to spinal instrumentation);
 - F. No more than three (3) facet joint levels (whether unilateral or bilateral) are being injected during the same session/procedure;
 - G. The spinal motion segment(s) is/are not posteriorly fused;
 - H. A facet joint radiofrequency denervation/ablation procedure is being considered.
- II. A second diagnostic facet joint injection/medial branch nerve block, is considered **medically appropriate** when **ALL** the following criteria are met:
 - A. Performed to confirm the validity of the positive clinical response to the initial facet joint injection/medial branch block;

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- B. Administered at the same level(s) as the initial diagnostic injection;
- C. The initial diagnostic facet joint injection/medial branch nerve block resulted in a positive response (i.e., at least 80% relief of facet-mediated pain for at least the expected minimum duration of the effect of the local anesthetic);
- D. A facet joint radiofrequency denervation/ablation procedure is being considered.

Therapeutic Facet Joint/Medial Branch Nerve Block as an Alternative Treatment when Radiofrequency Ablation/Neurotomy is Contraindicated

- III. The first therapeutic facet joint injections/medial branch blocks performed as an alternative treatment to a radiofrequency ablation/neurotomy are considered **medically necessary** when **ALL** the following criteria are met:
 - A. The individual is not a candidate for a facet joint radiofrequency denervation/ablation due to **either** of the following contraindications:
 - 1. Established spinal pseudoarthrosis at the spinal level intended for treatment; **or**
 - 2. Implanted electrical device (i.e., cardiac pacemaker, cardiac defibrillator, dorsal column stimulator, dorsal root ganglion stimulator, peripheral neurostimulator, cranial neurostimulator, implantable programmable drug pump);
 - B. There has been a documented positive response with two (2) sequential diagnostic facet joint injections/medial branch nerve blocks at the same level(s). Note: a positive response is evidenced by at least 80% relief of facet mediated pain for at least the expected minimum duration of the effect of the local anesthetic used.
- IV. Subsequent therapeutic facet joint injections/medial branch nerve blocks performed as an alternative treatment to a radiofrequency ablation/neurotomy are considered **medically appropriate** when **ALL** the following criteria are met:
 - A. The individual is not a candidate for a facet joint radiofrequency denervation/ablation due to **either** of the following:
 - 1. Established spinal pseudoarthrosis at the spinal level intended for treatment; **or**
 - 2. Implanted electrical device (e.g., cardiac pacemaker, cardiac defibrillator, dorsal column stimulator, dorsal root ganglion stimulator, peripheral neurostimulator, cranial neurostimulator, implantable programmable drug pump);
 - B. Documented pain relief of at least 50% for at least 12 weeks following the previous facet joint injection/medial branch block;
 - C. Performed at a minimum of six (6) months following the prior therapeutic facet joint injection/medial branch nerve block at the same level(s).

Facet Joint Injection Performed with Synovial Cyst Aspiration

- V. An initial facet joint injection performed with synovial cyst aspiration is considered **medically appropriate**, when **BOTH** the following criteria are met:

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- A. Advanced diagnostic imaging studies (i.e., magnetic resonance imaging [MRI], computed tomography [CT] scan, CT myelogram) confirm compression or displacement of the corresponding nerve root by a facet joint synovial cyst;
 - B. Clinical correlation (based on history and physical exam) with the individual's signs and symptoms of radicular pain/radiculopathy.
- VI. A repeat facet joint injection with synovial cyst aspiration is considered **medically necessary** when there is documented pain relief of at least 50% for at least 12 weeks following the previous facet joint injection/medial branch nerve block.

Non-Indications

- VII. Performance of a facet joint injection or medial branch nerve block is considered **not medically necessary** for **ANY** of the following indications:
- A. Performed without the use of fluoroscopic or CT guidance;
 - B. Performed on the same day of service as another invasive modality or procedure. An exception is allowed for a facet joint injection being performed together with a transforaminal epidural steroid injection (TFESI) when the facet joint injection is performed for a synovial cyst aspiration on the same date of service;
 - C. Performed on more than three (3) contiguous levels. Criteria exception: if the facet joint injection/medial branch nerve block is performed at a spinal level contiguous with the posteriorly fused spinal motion segment;
 - D. Additional diagnostic facet joint injections/medial branch nerve blocks when there has been a prior successful radiofrequency denervation/ablation at the requested level;
 - E. When performed above C2-C3 (atlanto-occipital articulation or atlanto-axial articulation) or below L5-S1;
 - F. Performed subsequent to the initial two (2) diagnostic injections (i.e., therapeutic injection), except when performed as an alternative treatment when radiofrequency ablation/neurotomy treatment is contraindicated;
 - G. When facet joint injections/medial branch nerve blocks at the same level(s) are scheduled as a part of a "series" in one request without evaluation on response to the prior injection.
- VIII. Facet joint injection/medial branch nerve block is considered **investigational** for **ANY** of the following:
- A. Injectates other than anesthetic, corticosteroid, and/or contrast agent are administered alone or in combination;
 - B. The injection is performed under ultrasound guidance;
 - C. Facet joint injections/medial branch nerve blocks of the L5 - S1 facet joint, when used for the diagnosis or treatment of sacroiliac (SI) joint mediated pain.

RELATED POLICIES

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Corporate Medical Policy

7.01.42 Radiofrequency Facet and Sacroiliac Joint Ablation/Denervation, for requests related to L5 medial nerve branch and sacral lateral nerve branch blocks or ablation/neuromotomies.

7.01.115 Epidural Steroid Injections

11.01.03 Experimental or Investigational Services

POLICY GUIDELINE(S)

- I. This policy only applies to injections of an anesthetic, corticosteroid, and/or contrast agent.
- II. This policy is only applicable to facet joint injections/medial branch nerve blocks performed for facet-mediated pain.
- III. Facet joint injection/medial branch nerve block applies directly to the facet joint(s) blocked, and not to the number of nerves blocked that innervate the facet joint(s).
- IV. A second diagnostic facet joint injection/ block should only be performed with the intent that, if successful, a facet joint radiofrequency denervation/ablation (facet neurotomy, facet rhizotomy) would be considered as an option at the diagnosed level(s).
- V. Only two (2) diagnostic facet joint injections/medial branch nerve blocks are permitted at the same level(s). Note: More than two (2) facet joint injections/medial branch nerve blocks at the same level and same side are considered to be therapeutic rather than diagnostic and must meet the criteria for therapeutic facet joint injections/medial branch nerve blocks.
- VI. When criteria are met, a diagnostic facet joint injection/medial branch nerve block following a spinal fusion may be performed at an unfused spinal level contiguous with the fused spinal motion segment, if a prior injection/block was negative at the requested level.

DESCRIPTION

Definitions for Facet Joint Injections/ Medial Branch Blocks:

Axial relates to or situated in the central part of the body, in the head and trunk as distinguished from the limbs, (e.g., axial skeleton).

Cervical facet pain is pain located in the cervical spine, which may be characterized by chronic headaches, restricted motion, and axial neck pain, which may radiate sub-occipitally to the shoulders or mid-back.

Facet joint pain is a set of concurrent signs or symptoms to describe the facet joint as the pain generator. The typical clinical signs or symptoms may include local paraspinal tenderness; pain that is brought about or increased on hyperextension, rotation, and lateral bending; low back stiffness; absence of neurologic deficit; absence of root tension signs (non- radiating below the knee, absence of paresthesia).

Facet (zygapophyseal) joints are paired, diarthrodial synovial joints located between the superior and inferior articular pillars in the posterior spinal column, innervated by medial branch nerves, from C2 -

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C3 to L5 - S1. Note: The articulations between occiput - atlas (C1) and the atlas (C1) and the axis (C2) and below L5 - S1 (sacrum) are not facet joints.

Facet level is the zygapophyseal joint or the two medial branch (MB) nerves that innervate that zygapophyseal joint. Each level has a pair of facet joints: one on the right side and one on the left side of the spine.

Facet joint injection/medial branch block (MBB) is the injection of local anesthetic and possibly a corticosteroid in the facet joint capsule (facet joint injection) or along the nerves supplying the facet joints (medial branch nerve block) from C2-C3 to L5-S1. Even though either procedure can be used to diagnose facet joint pain, a medial branch block is generally considered more appropriate. Note: The facet joint injection/medial branch nerve block applies directly to the facet joint(s) blocked and not to the number of nerves block that innervate the facet joint(s).

Non-radicular back pain is non-neuropathic pain which is not causally related to a spinal nerve root irritation and does not produce reproducible neuropathic symptoms in an objective dermatomal pattern.

Positive response (to a diagnostic facet joint injection/medial branch block) is at least 80% relief of facet -mediated pain for at least the expected minimum duration of the effect of the local anesthetic used. Note: A response to the first two injection(s) must be documented.

Session is a time period, which includes all procedures (i.e., medial branch block (MBB), intra-articular facet joint injection, and radiofrequency ablation [RFA]) performed on a single date of service.

SUPPORTIVE LITERATURE

Generally, the outcomes from clinical studies reflect that a diagnostic facet joint injection may assist in determining whether specific interventions targeting the facet joint are indicated.

Manchikanti et al (2015) stated that despite interventional procedures being common as treatment strategies for facet joint pathology, there is a paucity of literature investigating these therapeutic approaches. A systematic review and best evidence synthesis of the effectiveness of therapeutic facet joint interventions in managing chronic spinal pain was conducted to evaluate and update the clinical utility of therapeutic lumbar, cervical, and thoracic facet joint interventions in managing chronic spinal pain. A total of 21 randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and 5 observational studies were assessed. The limitations of this systematic review include an overall paucity of high-quality studies and the lack of investigations related to thoracic facet joint injections. Based on the present assessment for the management of spinal facet joint pain, the evidence for long-term improvement is Level II for therapeutic facet joint nerve blocks in the cervical, thoracic, and lumbar spine.

Wardhana et al (2022) acknowledge that a few studies have explored the effectiveness of facet interventions for chronic lumbar pain, but there has been no clear consensus of which procedures are more superior. In a meta-analysis, this study aimed to compare the effectiveness of corticosteroid injection (CI) and radiofrequency (RF) ablation for the treatment of lumbar facet joint (LFJ) pain. In total, 7 studies (n=552 patients) were included in the analysis. The corticosteroid agents were methylprednisolone in 4 trials, betamethasone in 2 trials, and dexamethasone in 1 trial. Pulsed RF

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was performed in 4 trials, whereas continuous RF was performed in 3 trials. Treatment with CI was associated with higher pain intensity score than RF ablation (3 trials; $p < 0.00001$), with substantial heterogeneity. Pain intensity scores at 6 months were significantly higher in patients treated with CI than RF ablation (7 trials, $p = 0.0002$), with substantial heterogeneity. The estimated effect of CI on pain intensity score at 12 months when CI was compared to RF ablation showed a statistically insignificant increase ($p = 0.08$), with substantial heterogeneity. Overall, the authors concluded that the pooled analysis from limited trials showed a benefit of RF to the improvement of pain intensity and functional disability when comparing RF with CI for the treatment of LFJ pain.

Pasuhirunnikorn et al (2023) evaluated the effect of prolonged concordant response and functional clinical improvement between lidocaine and bupivacaine for cervical medial branch block (CMBB) in chronic cervical facet syndrome. Sixty-two patients diagnosed with chronic cervical facet syndrome were randomized into either lidocaine or bupivacaine groups. The patients, pain assessor, and pain specialist were blinded. The therapeutic CMBB was performed under ultrasound guidance. Either 2% lidocaine or 0.5% bupivacaine with a volume of 0.5-1 milliliter (mL) per level was injected according to the patient's pain symptoms. The primary outcome was the duration of pain reduction by at least 50%. The Numerical Rating Scale (NRS) of 0-10 and the Neck Disability Index questionnaire were recorded. There was no significant difference in the duration of 50% and 75% pain reduction and Neck Disability Index between the lidocaine and bupivacaine groups. Lidocaine provided significant pain reduction up to 16 weeks ($P < 0.05$) and significant improvement in neck functional outcomes up to 8 weeks ($P < 0.01$) compared to the baseline. Bupivacaine yielded significant pain alleviation for up to 8 weeks for pain upon neck mobilization ($P < 0.05$) and demonstrated notable improvement in neck function up to 4 weeks ($P < 0.01$) compared to the baseline. CMBB using lidocaine or bupivacaine provided clinical benefits in prolonged analgesic effect and improving neck functions for chronic cervical facet syndrome. Lidocaine illustrated better performance and could be considered a local anesthetic of choice regarding the prolonged concordance response.

Manchikanti et al (2024) evaluated the effectiveness of facet joint nerve blocks as a therapeutic modality in managing chronic axial spinal pain of facet joint origin by conducting a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and observational studies. The primary outcome measure was the proportion of patients with significant relief and functional improvement of greater than 50% of at least 3 months. Duration of relief was categorized as short-term (less than 6 months) and long-term (greater than 6 months). Despite the availability of multiple studies, the paucity of literature is considered as the major drawback. Based on the present systematic review and meta-analysis with 9 RCTs and 12 non-randomized studies, the evidence is Level II with moderate to strong recommendation for therapeutic facet joint nerve blocks in managing spinal facet joint pain.

PROFESSIONAL GUIDELINE(S)

In 2020, American Society of Interventional Pain Physicians (ASIPP) issued guidelines on the use of facet joint injections in the management of chronic spinal pain (Manchikanti 2020), recommending:

- Facet joint nerve blocks for diagnosis of facet joint pain is recommended with a moderate to strong strength of recommendation for the lumbar spine (evidence level I to II), moderate

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strength for the cervical spine (evidence level II), and moderate strength for the thoracic spine (evidence level II).

- Facet joint nerve blocks for treatment of facet joint pain is recommended with moderate strength for lumbar spine (evidence level II) and cervical spine (evidence level II), and weak to moderate strength for thoracic spine (evidence level III).
- Intraarticular injections for treatment of facet joint pain with is a weak strength recommendation with lower levels of evidence (level III, IV, and V evidence for the thoracic, lumbar, and cervical spine respectively).

The American Society of Regional Anesthesia and Pain Medicine convened a multispecialty, international working group and published a consensus practice guideline on interventions for lumbar facet joint pain (Cohen 2020). The expert panel concluded that lumbar medial branch radiofrequency ablation (RFA) may provide benefit to well-selected individuals, with medial branch blocks (MBB) being more predictive than IA injections. Some of the guideline recommendations include:

- A 3-month trial of different conservative treatments before facet joint interventions. (Grade C, low level of certainty)
- MBB should be the prognostic injection of choice before RFA. IA injections may be used for both diagnostic and therapeutic purposes in some individuals (e.g., young people with inflammatory pain, people at risk of RFA complications). (Grade C, moderate level of certainty)
- Recommendation against the routine use of both therapeutic MBB and IA injections, acknowledging that there may be some context in which these can be useful (e.g., prolonged relief from prognostic blocks, contraindications to RFA). (Grade D, moderate level of certainty)
- Greater than 50% pain relief is used as the threshold for designating a prognostic block as positive but recognize that using higher cut-off values may result in higher RFA success rates. Secondary outcomes such as activity levels may also be considered when deciding whether to proceed with RFA. (Grade B, moderate level of certainty).

REGULATORY STATUS

Not Applicable

CODE(S)

- Codes may not be covered under all circumstances.
- Code list may not be all inclusive (AMA and CMS code updates may occur more frequently than policy updates).
- (E/I)=Experimental/Investigational
- (NMN)=Not medically necessary/appropriate

CPT Codes

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Code	Description
0213T (E/I)	Injection(s), diagnostic or therapeutic agent, paravertebral facet (zygapophyseal) joint (or nerves innervating that joint) with ultrasound guidance; single level
0214T (E/I)	second level (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)
0215T (E/I)	third and any additional level(s) (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)
0216T (E/I)	Injection(s), diagnostic or therapeutic agent, paravertebral facet (zygapophyseal) joint (or nerves innervating that joint) with ultrasound guidance, lumbar or sacral; single level
0217T (E/I)	second level (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)
0218T (E/I)	third and any additional level(s) (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)
64490	Injection(s), diagnostic or therapeutic agent, paravertebral facet (zygapophyseal) joint (or nerves innervating that joint) with image guidance (fluoroscopy or CT), cervical or thoracic; single level
64491	second level (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)
64492	third and any additional level(s) (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)
64493	Injection(s), diagnostic or therapeutic agent, paravertebral facet (zygapophyseal) joint (or nerves innervating that joint) with image guidance (fluoroscopy or CT), lumbar or sacral; single level
64494	second level (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)
64495	third and any additional level(s) (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)

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HCPCS Codes

Code	Description
Not Applicable	

ICD10 Codes

Code	Description
Multiple Code	

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SEARCH TERMS

Not Applicable

CENTERS FOR MEDICARE AND MEDICAID SERVICES (CMS)

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[Facet Joint Interventions for Pain Management \(LCD L35936\)](#) [accessed 2026 Apr 26]

PRODUCT DISCLAIMER

- Services are contract dependent; if a product does not cover a service, medical policy criteria do not apply.
- If a commercial product (including an Essential Plan or Child Health Plus product) covers a specific service, medical policy criteria apply to the benefit.
- If a Medicaid product covers a specific service, and there are no New York State Medicaid guidelines (eMedNY) criteria, medical policy criteria apply to the benefit.
- If a Medicare product (including Medicare HMO-Dual Special Needs Program (DSNP) product) covers a specific service, and there is no national or local Medicare coverage decision for the service, medical policy criteria apply to the benefit.
- If a Medicare HMO-Dual Special Needs Program (DSNP) product DOES NOT cover a specific service, please refer to the Medicaid Product coverage line.

POLICY HISTORY/REVISION

Committee Approval Dates

03/20/25, 06/26/25, 06/18/26

Date	Summary of Changes
06/18/26	• Annual review; policy intent unchanged.
06/26/25	• Annual review; policy intent unchanged.
03/20/25	• New Policy created due to the splitting of policy content of CMP#7.01.87 into CMP#7.01.115 & CMP#7.01.116. No change to original policy criteria.
01/01/25	• Summary of changes tracking implemented.