

Clinical Policy: Sacroiliac Joint Interventions for Pain Management

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[Coding Implications](#)

[Revision Log](#)

Description

Treatment for sacroiliac joint (SIJ) dysfunction is usually conservative (non-surgical) and focuses on trying to restore normal motion in the joint. In patients who have failed to respond to conservative therapy, an SIJ injection can be helpful for both diagnostic and therapeutic purposes. SIJ injections into the synovial sac of the SIJ may provide immediate and significant pain relief.

Policy/Criteria

- I. It is the policy of PA Health and Wellness® (PHW) that invasive pain management procedures performed by a physician are **medically necessary** *when the relevant criteria are met and the member/enrollee receives only one procedure per visit, with or without radiographic guidance.*
 - A. Sacroiliac joint injections are medically necessary for the following indications:
 1. *One diagnostic or therapeutic sacroiliac joint (SIJ) injection* for SIJ pain, all of the following:
 - a. Somatic or nonradicular low back and lower extremity pain below the level of L5 vertebra that interferes with activities of daily living (ADLs) for at least three months;
 - b. Tenderness by palpation present over SIJ;
 - c. There is a positive response to at least three SIJ pain provocation tests (distraction, compression, thigh thrust, Gaenslen's, Patrick's test/FABER test, or sacral thrust [thrust tests may not be recommended in pregnant members/enrollees or those with connective tissue disorders];
 - d. The member/enrollee has failed to respond to conservative therapy including all of the following:
 - i. Chiropractic, physical therapy, or prescribed home exercise program ≥ 4 weeks;
 - ii. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) ≥ 3 weeks or NSAIDs contraindicated or not tolerated;
 - iii. Activity modification ≥ 4 weeks;
 - e. Clinical findings and imaging studies, when available, lack obvious evidence for disc-related or facet joint pain;
 - f. No other possible diagnosis is more likely.
 2. *A second diagnostic or confirmatory sacroiliac joint injection* when pain was improved by at least 75% after the first diagnostic SIJ injection and at least two weeks have passed since the initial injection.
 3. *Subsequent therapeutic SIJ injections* for recurrence of pain, all of the following:
 - a. Initial therapeutic injection(s) led to $\geq 50\%$ relief and functional improvement for at least two months;

CLINICAL POLICY

Sacroiliac Joint Interventions

- b. Request is for SIJ injection administered for temporary relief of lower back pain in conjunction with other noninvasive treatment methods (e.g., to participate in physical therapy), and not as a stand-alone therapy;
 - c. SIJ injection is given at intervals at least two months apart;
 - d. Less than four therapeutic SIJ injections have been given at the same site in the last 12 months.
- II. It is the policy of PHW that if pain does not improve by $\geq 75\%$ after the second diagnostic SIJ injection, *subsequent SIJ injections* are **not medically necessary** because effectiveness has not been established.
- III. It is the policy of PHW that *continuation of injections* beyond 12 months is considered **not medically necessary** because effectiveness and safety have not been established. When more definitive therapies cannot be tolerated or provided, consideration will be made on a case-by-case basis.
- IV. It is the policy of PHW that *sacroiliac nerve blocks* are considered **not medically necessary** because effectiveness has not been established.
- V. It is the policy of PHW that *radiofrequency neurotomy (conventional, cooled, and pulsed)* of the SIJ is considered **not medically necessary** because effectiveness has not been established. High-quality studies are lacking for conventional and pulsed radiofrequency neurotomy of the SIJ. For cooled radiofrequency neurotomy, additional well-designed studies are needed to evaluate effectiveness.

*Note: requests for services considered **not medically necessary** are to be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Medical Director/clinical reviewer must override criteria when, in his/her professional judgement, the requested item is medically necessary.

Background

Sacroiliac Joint Injections

Low back pain is the leading cause of global disability with the sacroiliac joint (SIJ) being an identifiable cause of chronic low back pain in 15 to 30% of patients.^{27,29} Treatment for sacroiliac joint dysfunction is usually conservative and focuses on trying to restore normal motion in the joint. In patients who have failed four to six weeks of a comprehensive exercise program, local icing, mobilization/manipulation and NSAIDs, an SIJ injection can be helpful for both diagnostic and therapeutic purposes.^{8,29} The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) advised the following criteria for confirming a diagnosis of SIJ pain: pain is present in the SIJ region; stressing the SIJ by performing clinical tests that are selective for the joint replicates the patient's pain; and selectively infiltrating the presumptive symptomatic joint with local anesthetic provides complete relief of the patient's pain.²⁸ SIJ injections into the synovial sac of the SIJ may provide immediate and significant pain relief. Adding a steroid to the solution injected may help to reduce any inflammation that may exist within the joint(s) and result in a prolonged period of freedom from pain.^{8,29}

CLINICAL POLICY

Sacroiliac Joint Interventions

A study by Visser et al. evaluated the effect of manual therapy and physiotherapy versus SIJ injection for low back and leg pain using a single-blinded randomized trial of treatment for 51 patients with SIJ-related leg pain. The effect of the treatment was evaluated after six and 12 weeks. Manual therapy had a significantly better success rate than physiotherapy ($p = 0.003$). The authors concluded in the small single-blinded prospective study, manual therapy appeared to be the choice of treatment for patients with SIJ-related leg pain.¹ A second choice of treatment to be considered is an intra-articular injection.^{1,22}

The recommended treatment duration is generally no more than four therapeutic SIJ injection sessions per rolling 12 months; however, when requests are made for continued treatment beyond 12 months, the following documentation can assist with determining medical necessity:

- Pain is severe enough to cause a significant degree of functional disability or vocational disability and providers use established and measurable goals and objective scales to assess functionality and activities of daily living (ADLs) measures.
- SIJ injections provide at least 50% sustained and consistent improvement of pain and/or 50% sustained and consistent objective improvement in function (using same scale as baseline) for at least three months.
- Rationale for the continuation of SIJ injections including but not limited to patients who are high-risk surgical candidates, do not desire surgery, and/or the recurrence of pain in the same location was sustained and consistently relieved with the SIJ injections for at least three months.²⁶

SIJ Radiofrequency Neurotomy

A growing number of studies have assessed the effect of treatment with radiofrequency denervation on SIJ pain, with mixed results. Radiofrequency denervation, also known as RFA or radiofrequency neurotomy, describes the use of radiofrequency energy to stop the transmission of pain signals to the central nervous system.⁵ One study found no difference between conventional radiofrequency ablation (RFA) and a sham treatment on pain relief.² A systematic review evaluating cooled radiofrequency ablation (RFA) procedures indicated cooled RFA demonstrated short term outcomes improvements of moderate strength of evidence for pain at three months and low for function at one month with no serious complications reported with strength of evidence low.²⁶ An Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) report noted that cooled radiofrequency denervation is probably moderately more effective for reducing pain and improving function than sham for sacroiliac pain in younger populations when compared to conventional radiofrequency for presumed facet joint pain.²⁵ A 2017 publication of three randomized controlled trials of 681 participants with chronic low back pain found no statistically significant improvement in pain from treatment with a standardized exercise program plus RFA, versus the standardized exercise program alone.³ A systematic review of 12 randomized controlled trials measuring the efficacy of radiofrequency neurotomy to manage chronic low back pain showed moderate evidence for both short-term and long-term improvement.²³

Ho and colleagues noted that radiofrequency denervation of the sacroiliac joint (SIJ) has been inconsistent because the variable sensory supply to the SIJ is difficult to disrupt completely using conventional ablation. The authors concluded that denervation showed long-term effectiveness for up to two years in the treatment of SIJ pain. However, there are limitations of this study

CLINICAL POLICY

Sacroiliac Joint Interventions

included with small sample size with a retrospective review with no placebo-control or sham-control group.²⁴ The American Society of Interventional Pain Physicians 2013 guidelines rate the evidence for cooled RFA as fair, and limited for conventional and pulsed RFA.⁵ The North American Spine Society (NASS) guidelines indicate that consideration can be given to cooled RFA of the sacral lateral branch nerves and dorsal ramus of L5 for patients with sacroiliac joint pain diagnosed with dual diagnostic blocks. Additional randomized trials are required to compare the various nerve ablation techniques of the lateral branch nerves for sacroiliac joint pain as well as trials with greater than 12 months of follow-up for evaluation of long-term pain relief via functional ability and quality of life.^{5,22}

Coding Implications

This clinical policy references Current Procedural Terminology (CPT®). CPT® is a registered trademark of the American Medical Association. All CPT codes and descriptions are copyrighted 2022, American Medical Association. All rights reserved. CPT codes and CPT descriptions are from the current manuals and those included herein are not intended to be all-inclusive and are included for informational purposes only. Codes referenced in this clinical policy are for informational purposes only. Inclusion or exclusion of any codes does not guarantee coverage. Providers should reference the most up-to-date sources of professional coding guidance prior to the submission of claims for reimbursement of covered services.

CPT Code that supports coverage criteria

CPT® Codes	Description
27096	Injection procedure for sacroiliac joint, anesthetic/steroid, with image guidance (fluoroscopy or CT) including arthrography when performed

CPT code that does not support coverage criteria

CPT® Codes	Description
64451	Injection(s), anesthetic agent(s) and/or steroid; nerves innervating the sacroiliac joint, with image guidance (ie, fluoroscopy or computed tomography)
64625	Radiofrequency ablation, nerves innervating the sacroiliac joint, with image guidance (ie, fluoroscopy or computed tomography)

HCPCS code that supports coverage criteria

HCPCS Codes	Description
G0260	Injection procedure for sacroiliac joint; provision of anesthetic, steroid and/or other therapeutic agent, with or without arthrography

Reviews, Revisions, and Approvals	Revision Date	Approval Date
New policy developed. Split from retired CP.MP.118 Injections for Pain Management. No criteria change.	09/18	10/18
Annual review of policy. Minor wording changes to match language in other pain injection policies. Added New 2020 CPT code- 64625 as not medically necessary. Added	06/2020	

CLINICAL POLICY

Sacroiliac Joint Interventions



Reviews, Revisions, and Approvals	Revision Date	Approval Date
criteria stating SIJ nerve blocks as not medically necessary, along with code 64451. References reviewed and updated, with two additional references added. Specialty review completed. Reworded II. for clarity.		
Annual review completed. Updated I.A. to specify that the criteria apply to therapeutic injections as well as diagnostic. Updated I.B. to state “A second diagnostic or confirmatory sacroiliac joint injection when pain was improved by at least 75% after the first diagnostic SIJ injection”, rather than that pain did not improve. I.C. updated to specify “therapeutic” SIJ injection. II was changed from 50% to 75%. Updated background. Replaced member with member/enrollee in all instances. Changed “review date” in the header to “date of last revision” and “date” in the revision log header to “revision date.” References reviewed, updated, and reformatted.	7/28/2022	
Annual review completed. Background updated with no impact to criteria. Added [thrust tests may not be recommended in pregnant members/enrollees or those with connective tissue disorders] to I.A.1.c. for clarity. Updated time requirements in I.A.1.d.i. and iii. to reflect 4 weeks. Minor rewording with no clinical significance. Background updated. ICD-10 Diagnosis Code table removed. References reviewed and updated. Internal specialist reviewed.	09/2023	

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CLINICAL POLICY

Sacroiliac Joint Interventions

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CLINICAL POLICY

Sacroiliac Joint Interventions

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