

## Clinical Policy: Discography

Reference Number: PA.CP.MP.115

Plan Effective Date: 01/2018

Date of Last Revision: 05/2024

[Coding Implications](#)

[Revision Log](#)

### Description

Discography is an invasive, intradiscal diagnostic technique that uses imaging and pain to diagnose discogenic pain.<sup>1</sup> In lumbar discography, contrast medium is injected into a lumbar intervertebral disc that is thought to be the cause of low back pain. This procedure is a screening tool used to reproduce a patient's pain, visualize the disc morphology, and determine if surgical intervention would be appropriate. Injection pressures are also taken into account when considering whether the test suggests symptomatic disc degeneration.<sup>1</sup>

### Policy/Criteria

- I. It is the policy of PA Health and Wellness (PHW) that lumbar discography is **not medically necessary**.
- II. It is the policy of PHW that there is insufficient evidence in the published peer-reviewed literature to support the use of cervical and thoracic discography.

### Background

#### *Lumbar Discography*

Lumbar Discography is a controversial diagnostic test for chronic discogenic low back pain after other possible sources of lumbar pain have been excluded, and surgery is being considered.<sup>1-2</sup> Proponents argue that recreating the patient's pain makes the test more sensitive and specific than imaging such as radiographs, myelography, and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which identify both symptomatic and asymptomatic abnormalities.<sup>2</sup> The North American Spine Society (NASS) supports the use of lumbar discography citing evidence that it associates pain with moderate to severe disc degeneration and endplate abnormalities on imaging. However, NASS indicates there is insufficient evidence to support the use of discography to predict successful outcomes in patients after lumbar surgery.<sup>3</sup> Critics argue that discography lacks reliability, given the absence of a clearly defined gold-standard reference test and the ability of the test to produce pain in patients without any prior history of back pain.<sup>2,4</sup> Additionally, studies have come to conflicting conclusions regarding the accuracy of lumbar discography in identifying the source of discogenic pain and in guiding treatment decisions.<sup>1,5-8</sup> Further, in a review of published studies since 2017, Hayes, Inc. identified five position statements or guidelines that confer weak support of lumbar provocative discography.<sup>17</sup>

Recent guidelines upheld prior statements regarding the unsuitability of discography as a stand-alone test. Moreover, there is evidence from a prospective cohort study that discography may lead to accelerated disk degeneration, such as occurrence of new herniations, loss of disc height, and loss of disc signal intensity.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Cervical/Thoracic Discography*

Cervical discography and thoracic discography remain controversial procedures due to the absence of validation and controlled outcome studies. Further limitations include a paucity of

literature and few studies of poor quality.<sup>9-11</sup> For cervical and thoracic pain, discography is not an appropriate diagnostic or screening tool.<sup>10-11</sup>

**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 2023, 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® Codes	Description
62290	Injection procedure for discography, each level; lumbar
62291	Injection procedure for discography, each level; cervical or thoracic
62292	Injection procedure for chemonucleolysis, including discography, intervertebral disc, single or multiple levels, lumbar
72285	Discography, cervical or thoracic, radiological supervision and interpretation
72295	Discography, lumbar, radiological supervision and interpretation

	Revision Date	Approval Date
<b>Reviews, Revisions, and Approvals</b>		
I: Changed lumbar discography from medically necessary to not medically necessary. Background updated. References reviewed and updated.	09/18	
I & II language clarified for not medically necessary and investigational. References reviewed and updated.	10/19	11/18/2019
Annual review of content, references, and coding. Specialty review. References reviewed and updated. ICD-10 codes removed.	2/18/2021	
References reviewed, updated and reformatted. “Experimental/investigational” verbiage replaced in policy statement II with “there is insufficient evidence in the published peer-reviewed literature to support the use of cervical and thoracic discography.” Changed “review date” in the header to “date of last revision” and “date” in the revision log header to “revision date.”	5/26/2022	
Annual review completed. Description and background updated with no impact to criteria. References reviewed and updated. Specialist reviewed.	06/2023	10/02/2023
Annual review. Updated background with no clinical significance. References reviewed and updated. Reviewed by external specialist.	06/2024	

## References

1. Wichman HJ. Discography: over 50 years of controversy. *WMJ*. 2007;106(1):27 to 29.
2. Eck JC, Sharan A, Resnick DK et al. Guideline update for the performance of fusion procedures for degenerative disease of the lumbar spine. Part 6: discography for patient selection. *J Neurosurg Spine*. 2014;21(1):37 to 41. doi:10.3171/2014.4.SPINE14269
3. North American Spine Society (NASS). Evidence-based clinical guidelines for multidisciplinary spine care: diagnosis and treatment of low back pain. Burr Ridge, IL: North American Spine Society; 2020.  
<https://www.spine.org/Portals/0/assets/downloads/ResearchClinicalCare/Guidelines/LowBackPain.pdf>. Published 2020. Accessed April 1, 2024.
4. Chou R. Subacute and chronic low back pain: Nonsurgical interventional treatment. UpToDate. [www.uptodate.com](http://www.uptodate.com). Updated June 10, 2021. Accessed April 1, 2024.
5. Carragee EJ, Lincoln T, Parmar VS, Alamin T. A gold standard evaluation of the “discogenic pain” diagnosis as determined by provocative discography. *Spine (Phila Pa 1976)*. 2006;31(18):2115 to 2123. doi:10.1097/01.brs.0000231436.30262.dd
6. Yuan Q, Tian W, Cheng XG, et al. Comparison between CT-discography and magnetic resonance imaging in lumbar disc diseases. *Zhonghua Yi Xue Za Zhi*. 2006;86(31):2166 to 2170.
7. Hao DJ, Liu TJ, Wu QN, He BR. The application of lumbar discography in the diagnosis and treatment of the discogenic low back pain. *Zhonghua Wai Ke Za Zhi*. 2006;44(24):1675 to 1677.
8. Buenaventura RM, Shah RV, Patel V, Benyamin R, Singh V. Systematic review of discography as a diagnostic test for spinal pain: an update. *Pain Physician*. 2007;10(1):147 to 164.
9. Manchikanti L, Abdi S, Atluri S, et al. An update of comprehensive evidence-based guidelines for interventional techniques in chronic spinal pain. Part II: guidance and recommendations. *Pain Physician*. 2013;16(2 Suppl):S49 to S283.
10. Singh V, Manchikanti L, Onyewu O, et al. An update of the appraisal of the accuracy of thoracic discography as a diagnostic test for chronic spinal pain. *Pain Physician*. 2012;15(6):E757 to E775.
11. Manchikanti L, Dunbar EE, Wargo BW, Shah RV, Derby R, Cohen SP. Systematic review of cervical discography as a diagnostic test for chronic spinal pain. *Pain Physician*. 2009;12(2):305 to 321.
12. Wang H, Li Z, Zhang C, et al. Correlation between high-intensity zone on MRI and discography in patients with low back pain. *Medicine (Baltimore)*. 2017;96(30):e7222. doi:10.1097/MD.00000000000007222.
13. Kallewaard JW, Guerts JW, Terheggen M, et al. No Transfer of Pressure to Adjacent Discs During Human Low-Pressure Controlled Discography: A Prospective Clinical Study. *Pain Med*. 2018;19(1):29 to 39. doi:10.1093/pm/pnx039
14. Hsu PS, Armon C, Levin K. Acute lumbosacral radiculopathy: Etiology, clinical features, and diagnosis. UpToDate. [www.uptodate.com](http://www.uptodate.com). Published March 20, 2024. Accessed April 1, 2024.
15. Gruver C, Guthmiller KB. Provocative Discography. In: *StatPearls*. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2023.

## CLINICAL POLICY

### Discography

16. Manchikanti L, Soin A, Benyamin RM, et al. An Update of the Systematic Appraisal of the Accuracy and Utility of Discography in Chronic Spinal Pain. *Pain Physician*. 2018;21(2):91 to 110.
17. Evidence Analysis Research Brief: The Clinical Utility of Lumbar Discography for Assessing Low Back Pain: Impact on Patient Management and Health Outcomes. Hayes. [www.hayesinc.com](http://www.hayesinc.com). Published June 28, 2023. Accessed April 2, 2024.