



Louisiana

Decompression of the Intervertebral Disc Using Laser Energy (Laser Discectomy) or Radiofrequency Coblation (Nucleoplasty)

Policy # 00087

Original Effective Date: 06/05/2002

Current Effective Date: 11/09/2020

Applies to all products administered or underwritten by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana and its subsidiary, HMO Louisiana, Inc. (collectively referred to as the "Company"), unless otherwise provided in the applicable contract. Medical technology is constantly evolving, and we reserve the right to review and update Medical Policy periodically.

Note: Percutaneous Intradiscal Electrothermal Annuloplasty, Radiofrequency Annuloplasty, and Biacuplasty are addressed separately in medical policy 00077.

Note: Percutaneous Discectomy is addressed separately in medical policy 00208.

Services Are Considered Investigational

Coverage is not available for investigational medical treatments or procedures, drugs, devices or biological products.

Based on review of available data, the Company considers laser discectomy and radiofrequency (RF) coblation (disc nucleoplasty) as techniques of disc decompression and treatment of associated pain to be **investigational**.*

Background/Overview

Discogenic Low Back Pain

Discogenic low back pain is a common, multifactorial pain syndrome that involves low back pain without radicular symptoms findings, in conjunction with radiologically confirmed degenerative disc disease.

Treatment

Typical treatment includes conservative therapy with physical therapy and medication management, with potential for surgical decompression in more severe cases.

A variety of minimally invasive techniques have been investigated as treatment of low back pain related to disc disease. Techniques can be broadly divided into those designed to remove or ablate

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disc material, and thus decompress the disc, and those designed to alter the biomechanics of the disc annulus. The former category includes chymopapain injection, automated percutaneous lumbar discectomy, laser discectomy, and, most recently, disc decompression using radiofrequency energy, referred to as a disc nucleoplasty.

Techniques that alter the biomechanics of the disc (disc annulus) include a variety of intradiscal electrothermal procedures discussed in medical policy 00077.

A variety of different lasers have been investigated for laser discectomy, including YAG (yttrium aluminum garnet), KTP (potassium titanyl phosphate), holmium, argon, and carbon dioxide lasers. Due to differences in absorption, the energy requirements and the rates of application differ among the lasers. In addition, it is unknown how much disc material must be removed to achieve decompression. Therefore, protocols vary by the length of treatment, but typically the laser is activated for brief periods only.

Radiofrequency coblation uses bipolar low-frequency energy in an electrical conductive fluid (eg, saline) to generate a high-density plasma field around the energy source. This creates a low-temperature field of ionizing particles that break organic bonds within the target tissue. Coblation technology is used in a variety of surgical procedures, particularly related to otolaryngology. The disc nucleoplasty procedure is accomplished with a probe mounted using a radiofrequency coblation source. The proposed advantage of coblation is that the procedure provides for controlled and highly localized ablation, resulting in minimal damage to surrounding tissue.

FDA or Other Governmental Regulatory Approval

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

A number of laser devices have been cleared for marketing by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) through the 510(k) process for incision, excision, resection, ablation, vaporization, and coagulation of tissue. Intended uses described in FDA summaries include a wide variety of procedures, including percutaneous discectomy. Trimedyne received 510(k) clearance in 2002 for the Trimedyne[®] Holmium Laser System Holmium: Yttrium, Aluminum Garnet (Holmium:YAG), in 2007 RevoLix Duo[™] Laser System, and in 2009 Quanta System LITHO Laser System. All were cleared, based on equivalence with predicate devices for percutaneous laser disc

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decompression/discectomy, including foraminoplasty, percutaneous cervical disc decompression/discectomy, and percutaneous thoracic disc decompression/discectomy. The summary for the Trimedyn system states that indications for cervical and thoracic decompression/discectomy include uncomplicated ruptured or herniated discs, sensory changes, imaging consistent with findings, and symptoms unresponsive to 12 weeks of conservative treatment. Indications for treatment of cervical discs also include positive nerve conduction studies. FDA product code: GEX.

In 2001, the Perc-D SpineWand^{TM†} (ArthroCare) was cleared for marketing by FDA through the 510(k) process. FDA determined that this device was substantially equivalent to predicate devices. It is used in conjunction with the ArthroCare Coblation^{®‡} System 2000 for ablation, coagulation, and decompression of disc material to treat symptomatic patients with contained herniated discs. Smith & Nephew acquired ArthroCare in 2014; as of 2017, Smith & Nephew has not provided any information about coblation devices specific to spine surgeries on its website. FDA product code: GEI.

Rationale/Source

Laser energy (laser discectomy) and radiofrequency coblation (nucleoplasty) are being evaluated for decompression of the intervertebral disc. For laser discectomy under fluoroscopic guidance, a needle or catheter is inserted into the disc nucleus, and a laser beam is directed through it to vaporize tissue. For disc nucleoplasty, bipolar radiofrequency energy is directed into the disc to ablate tissue. These minimally invasive procedures are being evaluated for the treatment of discogenic back pain.

For individuals who have discogenic back pain or radiculopathy who receive laser discectomy, the evidence includes systematic reviews of observational studies. Relevant outcomes are symptoms, functional outcomes, and treatment-related morbidity. While numerous case series and uncontrolled studies have reported improvements in pain levels and functioning following laser discectomy, the lack of well-designed and -conducted controlled trials limits interpretation of reported data. The evidence is insufficient to determine the effect of the technology on health outcomes.

For individuals who have discogenic back pain or radiculopathy who receive disc nucleoplasty with radiofrequency coblation, the evidence includes randomized controlled trials and systematic

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reviews. Relevant outcomes are symptoms, functional outcomes, and treatment-related morbidity. For nucleoplasty, there are 2 randomized controlled trials in addition to several uncontrolled studies. These randomized controlled trials are limited by the lack of blinding, an inadequate control condition in one, and inadequate data reporting in the second. The available evidence is insufficient to permit conclusions concerning the effect of these procedures on health outcomes due to multiple confounding factors that may bias results. High-quality randomized trials with adequate follow-up (at least 1 year), which control for selection bias, the placebo effect, and variability in the natural history of low back pain, are needed. The evidence is insufficient to determine the effect of the technology on health outcomes.

Supplemental Information

Practice Guidelines and Position Statements

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

In 2016, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) updated its guidance on laser lumbar discectomy for the treatment of sciatica. The guidance stated that current evidence “is inadequate in quantity and quality.”

Also in 2016, NICE also updated its guidance on percutaneous disc decompression using coblation for lower back pain and sciatica in 2016. NICE stated: “Current evidence on percutaneous coblation of the intervertebral disc for low back pain and sciatica raises no major safety concerns. The evidence on efficacy is adequate and includes large numbers of patients with appropriate follow-up periods.” The guidance also noted that the patient should be informed of the range of treatment options available.

American Pain Society

The 2009 American Pain Society practice guidelines on nonsurgical interventions for low back pain found that “there is insufficient (poor) evidence from randomized trials (conflicting trials, sparse and lower quality data, or no randomized trials) to reliably evaluate” a number of interventions including coblation.

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American Society of Interventional Pain Physicians

In 2009, updated in 2013, The American Society of Interventional Pain Physicians issued practice guidelines on lumbar disc compression and chronic spinal pain. The systematic reviews informing the 2013 guidelines found limited evidence for percutaneous laser disc decompression and limited to fair evidence for nucleoplasty.

U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Recommendations

Not applicable.

Medicare National Coverage

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services have determined that thermal intradiscal procedures, including percutaneous (or plasma) disc decompression or coblation, are not reasonable and necessary for the treatment of low back pain. Therefore, thermal intradiscal procedures, which include procedures that “employ the use of a radiofrequency energy source or electrothermal energy to apply or create heat and/or disruption within the disc for the treatment of low back pain, are noncovered.”

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has not published a national coverage decision on laser discectomy; however, the Centers did indicate the following in its decision on laser procedures:

“Medicare recognizes the use of lasers for many medical indications. Procedures performed with lasers are sometimes used in place of more conventional techniques. In the absence of a specific noncoverage instruction, and where a laser has been approved for marketing by the Food and Drug Administration, Medicare Administrative contractor discretion may be used to determine whether a procedure performed with a laser is reasonable and necessary and, therefore, covered.”

Ongoing and Unpublished Clinical Trials

A search of [ClinicalTrials.gov](https://clinicaltrials.gov) in February 2020 did not identify any ongoing or unpublished trials that would likely influence this review.

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Policy History

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04/18/2002 Medical Policy Committee review

06/05/2002 Managed Care Advisory Council approval

06/24/2002 Format revision. No substance change to policy.

06/01/2004 Medical Director review

07/20/2004 Medical Policy Committee review. Format revision. Policy and name change (replaces previous Nucleoplasty policy) and expanded to include laser discectomy.

07/26/2004 Managed Care Advisory Council approval

03/09/2006 Medical Director review

03/15/2006 Medical Policy Committee approval. Format revision, including addition of FDA and or other governmental regulatory approval and rationale/source. Coverage eligibility unchanged.

03/12/2008 Medical Director review

03/19/2008 Medical Policy Committee approval. No change to coverage eligibility.

03/04/2009 Medical Director review

03/18/2009 Medical Policy Committee approval. No change to coverage eligibility.

03/05/2010 Medical Director review

03/19/2010 Medical Policy Committee approval. No change to coverage eligibility.

03/03/2011 Medical Director review

03/16/2011 Medical Policy Committee approval. Title changed. Coverage wording changed.

04/12/2012 Medical Policy Committee review

04/25/2012 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.

03/04/2013 Coding updated

04/04/2013 Medical Policy Committee review

04/24/2013 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.

04/03/2014 Medical Policy Committee review

04/23/2014 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.

08/03/2015 Coding update: ICD10 Diagnosis code section added; ICD9 Procedure code section removed.

09/03/2015 Medical Policy Committee review

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- 09/23/2015 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.
- 10/06/2016 Medical Policy Committee review
- 10/19/2016 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.
- 01/01/2017 Coding update: Removing ICD-9 Diagnosis Codes
- 10/05/2017 Medical Policy Committee review
- 10/18/2017 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.
- 10/04/2018 Medical Policy Committee review
- 10/17/2018 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.
- 10/03/2019 Medical Policy Committee review
- 10/09/2019 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.
- 10/01/2020 Medical Policy Committee review
- 10/07/2020 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.

Next Scheduled Review Date: 10/2021

Coding

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Code Type	Code
CPT	62287
HCPCS	S2348
ICD-10 Diagnosis	M46.40-M46.49, M50.00-M50.03, M50.20-M50.23, M50.30-M50.33, M50.80-M50.83, M50.90-M50.93, M51.04-M51.06, M51.24-M51.27, M51.34-M51.37, M51.44-M51.47, M51.84-M51.87, M51.9, M96.1

*Investigational – A medical treatment, procedure, drug, device, or biological product is Investigational if the effectiveness has not been clearly tested and it has not been incorporated into standard medical practice. Any determination we make that a medical treatment, procedure, drug, device, or biological product is Investigational will be based on a consideration of the following:

- A. Whether the medical treatment, procedure, drug, device, or biological product can be lawfully marketed without approval of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and whether such approval has been granted at the time the medical treatment, procedure, drug, device, or biological product is sought to be furnished; or
- B. Whether the medical treatment, procedure, drug, device, or biological product requires further studies or clinical trials to determine its maximum tolerated dose, toxicity, safety, effectiveness, or effectiveness as compared with the standard means of treatment or diagnosis, must improve health outcomes, according to the consensus of opinion among experts as shown by reliable evidence, including:

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2. Credible scientific evidence published in peer-reviewed medical literature generally recognized by the relevant medical community; or
3. Reference to federal regulations.

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