Vertebral Axial Decompression

Policy # 00135
Original Effective Date: 08/06/2001
Current Effective Date: 12/19/2018

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.

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 vertebral axial decompression to be investigational.*

Background/Overview
Vertebral axial decompression (also referred to as mechanized spinal distraction therapy) is used as traction therapy to treat chronic low back pain. Specific devices available are described in the FDA or Other Governmental Regulatory Approval section.

In general, during treatment, the patient wears a pelvic harness and lies prone on a specially equipped table. The table is slowly extended, and a distraction force is applied via the pelvic harness until the desired tension is reached, followed by a gradual decrease of the tension. The cyclic nature of the treatment allows the patient to withstand stronger distraction forces compared with static lumbar traction techniques. An individual session typically includes 15 cycles of tension, and 10 to 15 daily treatments may be administered.

FDA or Other Governmental Regulatory Approval
U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
Several devices used for vertebral axial decompression have been cleared for marketing by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration through the 510(k) process. Devices include the VAX-D®‡, Decompression Reduction Stabilization (DRS®‡) System, Accu-SPINA®‡ System, DRX-3000®‡, DRX9000®‡, SpineMED Decompression Table®‡, Antalgic-Trak®‡, Lordex®‡ Traction Unit, and Triton®‡ DTS. According to labeled indications from the Food and Drug Administration, vertebral axial decompression may be used as a treatment modality for patients with incapacitating low back pain and for decompression of the intervertebral discs and facet joints. Food and Drug Administration product code: ITH.

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)
Medicare issued a national noncoverage policy (160.16) for vertebral axial decompression in 1997.

Rationale/Source
Evidence reviews assess the clinical evidence to determine whether the use of a technology improves the net health outcome. Broadly defined, health outcomes are length of life, quality of life, and ability to function—including benefits and harms. Every clinical condition has specific outcomes that are important to patients and to managing the course of that condition. Validated outcome measures are necessary to

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ascertain whether a condition improves or worsens; and whether the magnitude of that change is clinically significant. The net health outcome is a balance of benefits and harms.

To assess whether the evidence is sufficient to draw conclusions about the net health outcome of a technology, 2 domains are examined: the relevance and the quality and credibility. To be relevant, studies must represent one or more intended clinical use of the technology in the intended population and compare an effective and appropriate alternative at a comparable intensity. For some conditions, the alternative will be supportive care or surveillance. The quality and credibility of the evidence depend on study design and conduct, minimizing bias and confounding that can generate incorrect findings. The randomized controlled trial (RCT) is preferred to assess efficacy; however, in some circumstances, nonrandomized studies may be adequate. RCTs are rarely large enough or long enough to capture less common adverse events and long-term effects. Other types of studies can be used for these purposes and to assess generalizability to broader clinical populations and settings of clinical practice.

VERTEBRAL AXIAL DECOMPRESSION FOR CHRONIC LUMBAR PAIN

Randomized Controlled Trials
Schimmel et al (2009) published results from a randomized sham-controlled trial of intervertebral axial decompression. Sixty subjects with chronic symptomatic lumbar disc degeneration or bulging disc with no radicular pain and no prior surgical treatment (dynamic stabilization, fusion, or disc replacement) were randomized to a graded activity program with an Accu-SPINA device (20 traction sessions during 6 weeks, reaching >50% of body weight) or to a graded activity program with a nontherapeutic level of traction (<10% body weight). In addition to traction, the device provided massage, heat, relaxing blue light, and music during the treatment sessions. Neither patients nor evaluators were informed about the intervention received until after the 14-week follow-up assessment, and intention-to-treat analysis was performed (93% of subjects completed follow-up). Both groups showed improvements in validated outcome measures (visual analog scale [VAS] scores for back and leg pain, Oswestry Disability Index, 36-Item Short-Form Health Survey), but no significant differences between treatment groups. For example, VAS scores for low back pain decreased from 61 to 32 in the active group and from 53 to 36 in the sham group. Evidence from this RCT did not support improvements in health outcomes with vertebral axial decompression.

Isner-Horobeti et al (2016) reported on a preliminary double-blind RCT comparing high-force traction (50% body weight; n=8) with low-force traction (10% body weight; n=9) for individuals with acute low back pain and radiculopathy due to lumbar disc herniation. Patients were enrolled from a French emergency department. Inclusion criteria were lumbar sciatica of fewer than 6 weeks in duration, secondary to disc herniation based on clinical exam, confirmed by lumbar tomodensitometry. Patients with clinical neurologic deficits, sciatic due to something other than disc herniation, or abnormalities on tomodensitometry were excluded. For the trial's primary outcome (reduction in radicular pain measured by a 100-mm VAS), both groups demonstrated significant improvements from baseline to day 28 (see Table 1). However, there was no significant group by time interaction regarding pain reduction. Similar findings were seen for lumbo-pelvic-hip mobility (measured by the finger-toe test), and nerve root compression (measured by the straight leg raise test).
Overall, this trial suggested some rapid short-term within-subjects improvements with high-dose lumbar traction. Although lumbar traction was not compared with a placebo, the comparison with low-level traction may approximate a placebo, similar to the Schimmel RCT, which used traction at 10% body weight traction as a placebo. The lack of significant interaction term suggests that the active intervention is not associated with improved outcomes. However, the trial’s small size might mean that it was underpowered.

Sherry et al (2001) conducted an RCT comparing vertebral axial decompression (using the VAX-D device) with transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation. While a 68% success rate was associated with VAX-D compared with a 0% success rate with transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, without a true placebo control, the results are difficult to interpret scientifically. In 2007, 2 small randomized trials (N=27, N=64) found little to no difference between patients treated with or without mechanical traction.

**SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE**

For individuals who have chronic lumbar pain who receive vertebral axial decompression, the evidence includes RCTs. Relevant outcomes are symptoms, functional outcomes, quality of life, and treatment-related morbidity. Evidence for the efficacy of vertebral axial decompression on health outcomes is limited. Because a placebo effect may be expected with any treatment that has pain relief as the principal outcome, RCTs with sham controls and validated outcome measures are required. The only sham-controlled randomized trial published to date did not show a benefit of vertebral axial decompression compared with the control group. The evidence is insufficient to determine the effects of the technology on health outcomes.

**References**


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**Policy History**

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07/19/2001 Medical Policy Committee review
08/06/2001 Managed Care Advisory Council approval
07/15/2003 Medical Policy Committee review
08/25/2003 Managed Care Advisory Council approval
12/07/2004 Medical Director review
12/21/2004 Medical Policy Committee review. Format revision. No substance change to policy.
01/31/2005 Managed Care Advisory Council approval
07/07/2006 Format revision, including addition of FDA and or other governmental regulatory approval and rationale/source. Coverage eligibility unchanged.
04/04/2007 Medical Director review
04/18/2007 Medical Policy Committee approval. No change to coverage eligibility.
04/02/2009 Medical Director review
04/15/2009 Medical Policy Committee approval. No change to coverage eligibility.
04/08/2010 Medical Director review
04/21/2010 Medical Policy Committee approval. No change to coverage eligibility.
04/07/2011 Medical Policy Committee review
04/13/2011 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. No change to coverage eligibility.
04/12/2012 Medical Policy Committee review
04/25/2012 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. No change to coverage eligibility.
05/02/2013 Medical Policy Committee review
05/22/2013 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. No change to coverage eligibility.
08/07/2014 Medical Policy Committee review
08/20/2014 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.
08/03/2015 Coding update: ICD10 Diagnosis code section added; ICD9 Procedure code section removed.
12/03/2015 Medical Policy Committee review
12/16/2015 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.
12/01/2016 Medical Policy Committee review
01/01/2017 Coding update: Removing ICD-9 Diagnosis Codes
12/07/2017 Medical Policy Committee review
12/20/2017 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.
12/06/2018 Medical Policy Committee review
12/19/2018 Medical Policy Implementation Committee approval. Coverage eligibility unchanged.

Next Scheduled Review Date: 12/2019

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Coding

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Codes used to identify services associated with this policy may include (but may not be limited to) the following:

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<th>Code Type</th>
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<tr>
<td>CPT</td>
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<td>S9090</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICD-10 Diagnosis</td>
<td>All related diagnoses</td>
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*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:

1. Consultation with the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association technology assessment program (TEC) or other nonaffiliated technology evaluation center(s);
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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