

Dermatology Coding Alert

Reader Questions: Accentuate the Modifier, Eliminate the Hyphen

Question: I noticed that the August Dermatology Coding Alert didn't include a hyphen before a modifier. I remember hearing that the AMA isn't using hyphens now, either. Will this change how I should fill out my forms or make out correspondence?

Kentucky Subscriber

Answer: Luckily, this is one AMA change that probably won't make too much difference in your work. The AMA has dropped the hyphen from its modifier publications including CPT's coding manuals and CPT Assistant.

The AMA used the hyphen as a formatting convention to ensure that people realized an upcoming number was a modifier. The symbol also avoided numerical confusion. The hyphen alerted you that the final two digits, such as "-25," weren't part of the CPT code.

Good news: The hyphen never mattered for charge entry. On a CMS-1500 written or electronic claim, you enter the five-digit CPT code and then enter the modifier in a separate place. The written world will now mirror that method.

The change's effect: Modifier -25 becomes modifier 25. Coding Institute publications will, however, maintain the hyphen when designating a modifier-appended CPT code, such as 99202-25 (Office or other outpatient visit for the evaluation and management of a new patient; significant, separately identifiable evaluation and management service by the same physician on the same day of the procedure or other service).

Don't change your modifier style for written correspondence. Eliminating the hyphen in your appeal letters is unnecessary. The hyphen emphasizes the modifier and lets the reader know you didn't omit any digits from a code. Because insurers tend to ignore modifiers, maintaining the hyphen in your written correspondence is a good idea.