

Internal Medicine Coding Alert

Reader Question: Special Random Audit

Question: What does special random audit by Medicare mean? Is it a serious problem? Is it even a problem?

Anonymous Texas Subscriber

Answer: Although that particular term is not familiar, it is probably no reason to panic, says Stephenson. There are a number of reasons other than suspected fraud or abuse that a practice may be asked to submit records for review or be audited by Medicare.

What happens is certain codes are focused upon from time to time and if your practice provides services with the codes in question, it is possible that you may be asked to submit medical records for review, he notes. These are random in that it doesn't necessarily mean that just because you provide the services you're going to get audited. And it doesn't mean you've done anything wrong if you are audited, he says. That is a huge misconception about audits in general.

Sometimes, a beneficiary complaint may trigger audits against another provider in your vicinity, and you may be audited as a comparison to that provider, he adds.

Other times, Medicare may notice certain trends in your billing that don't fall within the regional average of code usage. This may prompt a request for review, but doesn't mean you're under the gun unless your billing isn't justified in the records.

A Medicare audit is never a problem unless you aren't following the guidelines consistently, he emphasizes. People assume that because Medicare requests an audit that they are done for. But in reality, the carriers have to make sure that practices are being compliant.

These types of audits are usually simple and may require only 10 to 12 records.

I've never heard of an audit referred to the way the question phrases it, however, he notes. I would say not to worry unless, of course, there are billing practices being done outside the guidelines. If that's the case, then there will be a lot more involved than just a handful of records getting reviewed.

An in-office compliance plan can save many headaches because it provides an organized method to ensure that your

coding and billing are monitored for correctness, and because it shows that you are making an effort to go by the book, Stephenson advises. This can open the door for leniency in case things dont go well in an audit. (See related article on physician compliance guide in enclosed insert.)