

## Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

### Medicare Policy: Get a Fix on the Latest COVID-19 Updates

**Review your MAC's guidance before you submit claims.**

If you're trying to wrap your head around the whirlwind of Medicare policy changes over the last few months, you are not alone. As confounding as all the revisions are, recent updates do offer more relief. Read on for the details.

**Context:** On April 30, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) announced another round of "sweeping changes" to address the COVID-19 public health emergency (PHE) and its impact on the healthcare industry. This second interim final rule, published in the Federal Register on May 8, aims to offer regulatory flexibilities and advice as the nation moves into a new phase of the pandemic.

"The war is far from over, but in various areas of the country, the tide is turning in our favor," said CMS Administrator **Seema Verma** in a release. "Building on what was already extraordinary, unprecedented relief for the American healthcare system, CMS is seeking to capitalize on our gains by helping to safely reopen the American healthcare system."

#### Pocket This Checklist of the Top Changes

CMS' new waivers, expansions, and policy changes offer relief across a spectrum of healthcare mediums. Here's a quick look at five of the most important updates:

**1. Telehealth:** Among several telehealth updates, these are the standouts.

- CMS will now allow more practitioners to bill for telehealth services, including physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech language pathologists.
- Certain telehealth E/M services can be audio-only now - with restrictions.
- CMS is increasing some telehealth services payments to align with in-person visits.
- The agency will use a subregulatory process during the PHE to add more telehealth services to its coverage list.



**2. Testing:** CMS hopes to up its COVID-19 testing ante and offers a plethora of pro-testing policies to back that up. Highlights include:

- Any healthcare provider authorized under state law can now order COVID-19 testing for a beneficiary without a physician or nonphysician practitioner (NPP) written order.
- Pharmacists acting as Medicare labs and within state law can administer COVID-19 tests.
- Hospitals and providers who collect specimens for COVID-19 testing will get a separate payment.
- NPPs like physician assistants (PAs), nurse practitioners (NPs), clinical nurse specialists (CNSs), and others "may order, furnish directly, and supervise the performance of diagnostic tests" through the duration of the PHE, the interim final rule says.

**3. Hospitals and locations:** With its "Hospitals Without Walls" initiative, CMS offers several new options to increase capacity and cover alternative venues for patient care. Examples of policy expansions include:

- Allow teaching hospitals to add temporary beds.
- Permit inpatient rehabilitation facilities (IRFs) to take in acute-care hospital patients.
- Enable payments for some outpatient services in expansion locations like parking lots, gyms, and such.

**4. Mental health:** "Community Mental Health Centers can furnish certain therapy and counseling services in a client's home to ensure access to necessary services and maintain continuity of care," the fact sheet notes.

**5. Staffing:** CMS is easing up on the regulatory burdens associated with staffing. These workforce flexibilities are OK during the PHE:

- Physical and occupational therapy assistants can do maintenance therapy to free up physical and occupational therapists for more important beneficiary services.
- Residents at teaching hospitals can go to hospitals strained by COVID-19 without penalties.
- Medical staff reappraisals at ambulatory surgery centers are waived under the PHE to allow clinicians to continue to assist patients without the administrative burden.

**Resources:** Review the interim final rule, including instructions on how to comment by the July 7 deadline, at [www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-05-08/pdf/2020-09608.pdf](http://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-05-08/pdf/2020-09608.pdf).

See the CMS fact sheet from April 30 at

[www.cms.gov/newsroom/press-releases/cms-announces-independent-commission-address-safety-and-quality-nursing-homes](http://www.cms.gov/newsroom/press-releases/cms-announces-independent-commission-address-safety-and-quality-nursing-homes).

**Disclaimer:** Information related to COVID-19 is changing rapidly. This information was accurate at the time of writing. Be sure to stay tuned to future issues of Part B Insider for more information.