

Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

Reader Question: Note Two Ways to Code Patient Complaint Resulting From Previous Injury

Prior conditions can contribute to patient's current complaint -- keep track of them by using the appropriate ICD-9 codes.

Question: One of our patients presented because he's experiencing neck pain that generated from an area of the spine where he suffered a previous injury. How should I code the diagnosis?

Answer: Document and code prior conditions that contribute to a patient's current complaint -- if they affect the management of the current condition.

Prior trauma, such as a previously broken bone or other injury, can cause patients to experience back pain. If the patient's pain stems from a previous condition, you may code that diagnosis to justify pain management procedures your neurologist performs.

Depending on the situation, there may be late-effect codes or V codes that you may report in addition to the current complaint that show a late effect or a personal history of trauma.

Option 1: If the patient's chronic neck pain is documented as due to a prior traumatic vertebral fracture -- at C2-C3, for instance -- you could code this as:

- 338.21 -- Chronic pain due to trauma
- 723.1 -- Neck pain
- 905.1 -- Late effect of cervical closed fracture.

Option 2: If your provider's documentation does not include a "cause and effect" link to the current condition, you could code this scenario as 338.21, 723.1, and V15.51 (Personal history of injury, healed traumatic fracture).

Personal history "V codes" provide additional information to the payer indicating that the patient has had this condition or disease in the past but the codes do not include any causality for the patient's current complaints.

The key to the correct coding of these contributory conditions is making sure they are appropriately documented in the medical record. This information is central to justifying medical necessity. If the physician has not documented the contributory conditions, you cannot report them.