

Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

Reader Question: Some Symptoms Inherent in Diagnoses

Question: Can I report the diagnosis codes for tonsillitis, pharyngitis and upper respiratory infection together? Or do I just code the URI?

Answer: In most cases, you can report multiple diagnosis codes for this visit. Although the ICD9-CM guidelines say that you shouldn't code symptoms and also the disease, it's possible that these symptoms are separate from the URI. So whereas you wouldn't code pneumonia and also code a cough or fever (as these are likely symptoms of the pneumonia), it is possible that tonsillitis or pharyngitis could be separate diagnoses in addition to the URI. The decision should lie with the practitioner.

For instance, tonsillitis is typically inherent in pharyngitis, so you most likely won't report both at the same time.

If this was going on a claim to your Medicare contractor, you most likely wouldn't receive a denial for submitting all three codes. However, if you are trying to increase your medical decision-making (MDM) level by coding for three different problems, you would have trouble substantiating that, since the physician likely didn't have to do any additional workup for each problem.