

Outpatient Facility Coding Alert

You Be the Coder: Polyp Ablation During Colonoscopy

Question: We encountered a colonoscopy patient recently who required a laser tumor ablation. What is the procedure, and how should we code this?

Utah Subscriber

Answer: You will use colonoscopy code 45388 (Colonoscopy, flexible; with ablation of tumor[s], polyp[s], or other lesion[s] [includes pre- and post-dilation and guide wire passage, when performed]). Because the term "ablation" simply means "to remove or excise," most physicians use the term to refer to using argon plasma coagulators (APC), lasers, heater probes or other devices to cauterize a lesion, angiodysplasia, polyp or a previously removed polyp's remnants to the point that it is destroyed.

Physicians may "ablate" the remnants of a large sessile (flat) polyp during a follow-up colonoscopy. If the polyp the physician removed during the initial colonoscopy was benign, the physician may perform a follow-up colonoscopy a few months later to make sure the entire polyp was removed. This is necessary because when the physician uses a snare to remove the initial polyp, there are often some cells still present that she must remove at a later date. The reason is that she has performed so much burning and removal during the initial visit, it isn't possible to determine complete removal success.

Treating the site with APC, which uses argon gas to deliver thermal energy to a field of tissue adjacent to the probe, is one of the more popular methods for destroying the leftover cells. You should report cauterization done with APC, laser, or heater probe with the ablation code (45388). On the other hand, not all follow-up visits to remove the polyp remnants will include ablation. If the gastroenterologist uses the snare technique, you should report 45385 (... with removal of tumor[s], polyp[s] or other lesion[s] by snare technique).

Note: Your physician is not limited to using these categories for ablation only. She can use all of these mentioned methods (APC, laser, heater probe) to control bleeding too.