Introduction

Peripheral nerves are the nerves that connect the brain and spinal cord to the body. When a peripheral nerve is injured, a neuroma can form at the area of injury. A neuroma is a thickening or growth composed of nerve tissue. Morton’s neuroma is a thickening of nerve tissue usually between the third and fourth toes. It can cause sharp, burning pain in the ball of the foot, a stinging sensation, or a feeling of numbness. There are a number of options to treat neuromas. Newer techniques involve trying to destroy the neuroma by using extreme cold or heat. Both of these techniques are investigational when used to try to treat Morton’s neuroma or other peripheral neuromas. More studies are needed to find out if these techniques are effective.

Note: The Introduction section is for your general knowledge and is not to be taken as policy coverage criteria. The rest of the policy uses specific words and concepts familiar to medical professionals. It is intended for providers. A provider can be a person, such as a doctor, nurse, psychologist, or dentist. A provider also can be a place where medical care is given, like a hospital, clinic, or lab. This policy informs them about when a service may be covered.
Ablation procedures to treat peripheral neuromas

Minimally invasive ablation procedures (eg, radiofrequency ablation and cryoablation) are considered investigational for the treatment of peripheral neuromas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedure</th>
<th>Investigational</th>
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<tr>
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Coding

<table>
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<th>Code</th>
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<td>CPT</td>
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<tr>
<td>64632</td>
<td>Destruction by neurolytic agent; plantar common digital nerve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64640</td>
<td>Destruction by neurolytic agent; other peripheral nerve or branch.</td>
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Related Information

N/A

Evidence Review

Description

Morton neuroma is a common and painful compression neuropathy of the dorsal foot. Morton neuroma has been treated with conservative measures (pads, orthotics, drugs) or surgery. Minimally invasive procedures, including radiofrequency ablation (RFA) and cryoablation, have been investigated as alternatives to open surgery. These ablation methods have also been used to treat other peripheral neuromas.
Background

Neuroma

A neuroma is a pathology of a peripheral nerve that develops as part of a normal reparative process. Neuromas may develop after nerve injury or result from chronic irritation, pressure, stretch, poor repair of nerve lesions or previous neuromas, laceration, crush injury, or blunt trauma. Neuromas typically appear 6 to 10 weeks after trauma, with most presenting within 1 to 12 months after injury or surgery. They may gradually enlarge over 2 to 3 years and may or may not be painful. Pain from a neuroma may be secondary to traction on the nerve by scar tissue, compression of the sensitive nerve endings by adjacent soft tissues, ischemia of the nervous tissue, or ectopic foci of ion channels that elicit neuropathic pain. Patients may describe the pain as low-intensity dull pain or intense paroxysmal burning pain, often triggered by external stimuli such as touch or temperature. Neuroma formation has been implicated as a contributor of neuropathic pain in residual limb pain, postthoracotomy, postmastectomy, and postherniorrhaphy pain syndromes. They may coexist with phantom pain or can predispose to it.

Morton Neuroma

Morton intermetatarsal neuroma is a common and painful compression neuropathy of the common digital nerve of the foot that may also be referred to as interdigital neuroma, interdigital neuritis, and interdigital or Morton metatarsalgia. Morton neuroma is usually associated with a throbbing, burning, or shooting pain localized to the plantar aspect of the foot. It is typically located between the third and fourth metatarsal heads, although it may appear in other proximal locations. It is histologically characterized by perineural fibrosis, endoneurial edema, axonal degeneration, and local vascular proliferation. Thus, some investigators do not consider Morton neuroma to be a true neuroma; instead, they consider it to be an entrapment neuropathy occurring secondary to compression of the common digital nerve under the overlying transverse metatarsal ligament. Morton neuroma appears 10-fold more often in women than in men, with an average age at presentation of around 50 years.

Diagnosis

Although a host of imaging methods are used to diagnosis Morton neuroma, including plain radiographs, magnetic resonance imaging, and ultrasonography, objective findings are unique to this condition and are primarily used to establish a clinical diagnosis. Thus, a patient’s toes often show splaying or divergence. Patients may describe the feeling of a “lump” on the foot
bottom or a feeling of walking on a rolled-up or wrinkled sock. Clinical examination with medial and lateral compression may reproduce the painful symptoms with a palpable “click” on interspace compression (Mulder sign).

**Treatment**

Management of patients diagnosed with Morton neuroma typically starts with conservative approaches, such as the use of metatarsal pads in shoes and orthotic devices that alter supination and pronation of the affected foot. These approaches try to reduce pressure and irritation of the affected nerve. They may provide relief, but do not alter the underlying pathology. There is scant evidence to support the effectiveness or comparative effectiveness of these practices. In a case series, Bennett et al (1995) evaluated a 3-stage protocol of “stepped care” through which private practice patients (N=115) advanced from stage I (education plus footwear modifications, and a metatarsal pad) to stage II (steroid injections with local anesthetic or local anesthetic alone), and into stage III (surgical resection) if stages I and II were not relieved within three months. Overall, 97 (85%) of 115 patients believed that pain had been reduced with the treatment program. However, 24 (21%) patients eventually required surgical excision of the nerve, and 23 (96%) of them had satisfactory results.

**Ablation Techniques**

Several minimally invasive procedures to treat refractory Morton neuroma are aimed at in situ destruction of the pathology: radiofrequency ablation (RFA) and cryoablation (also known as cryoneurolysis, cryolysis, cryoanalgesia). RFA uses heat generated by an electrode that conducts electromagnetic energy into a tissue or lesion to denature proteins and destroy cells. RFA is used to ablate a wide range of tissues or lesions, including osteoid osteoma; cardiovascular system pathologies; cervical pain syndromes; liver, lung, and other cancers; and varicosities. Cryoablation uses coolant to chill a cryoprobe to temperatures below -75°C, which when inserted into a lesion, freezes and kills the tissue. It has been used to treat Morton neuroma, other chronic nerve pain syndromes, and conditions for which RFA has been used.

This review primarily focuses on evidence for the use of RFA and cryoablation on painful neuromas, with emphasis on Morton neuroma and the comparative effectiveness of these less invasive therapies with open surgical resection of the nerve pathology.
Summary of Evidence

For individuals who have Morton neuroma who receive RFA, the evidence includes case series. Relevant outcomes are symptoms, functional outcomes, and treatment-related morbidity. Three case series identified reported outcomes for RFA to treat Morton neuroma. The body of evidence is highly heterogeneous regarding RFA protocols, prior conservative management, patient characteristics, follow-up durations, outcome measures, and reporting of outcomes. Variable proportions of patients require surgery after RFA, making the benefit of RFA for avoiding more invasive treatment uncertain. The evidence is insufficient to determine the effects of the technology on health outcomes.

For individuals who have Morton neuroma who receive cryoablation, the evidence includes case series. Relevant outcomes are symptoms, functional outcomes, and treatment-related morbidity. Only two retrospective case series on the use of cryoablation to treat peripheral nerve pain were identified in a literature review. The case series were heterogeneous regarding cryoablation protocols and length of follow-up. Outcome measures did not provide information on functional end points. The evidence is insufficient to determine the effects of the technology on health outcomes.

For individuals who have peripheral neuroma(s) other than Morton neuroma who receive ablation, the evidence is very limited: no published literature was identified. Relevant outcomes are symptoms, functional outcomes, and treatment-related morbidity. The evidence is insufficient to determine the effects of the technology on health outcomes.

Ongoing and Unpublished Clinical Trials

Some currently unpublished trials that might influence this review are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Key Trials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NCT No.</th>
<th>Trial Name</th>
<th>Planned Enrollment</th>
<th>Completion Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>NCT02838758</td>
<td>A 3-Arm Randomized Controlled Study Comparing Ultrasound-Guided Cryoablation, Ultrasound-Guided Perineural Lidocaine, and Ultrasound-Guided Perineural Saline to Treat Intrametatarsal Neuroma</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Dec 2020</td>
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Practice Guidelines and Position Statements

The Association of Extremity Nerve Surgeons (2014) published clinical practice guidelines relevant to this evidence review. The guidelines stated that “We do not recommend ablation in the primary treatment of Intermetatarsal Entrapment (Morton’s Neuroma).” The guidelines warned that cryoablation should be used with extreme caution, and, if used, should be performed in an open technique, not percutaneously. The guidelines also warned that radiofrequency ablation might cause thermal necrosis of adjacent tissues.

Medicare National Coverage

There is no national coverage determination.

Regulatory Status

Although RFA probes and generators and cryoablation equipment have been cleared for marketing by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration through the 510(k) process, none appear to be specifically indicated for the treatment of Morton neuroma or any other specific peripheral neuroma.

References


**History**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>08/01/18</td>
<td>New policy, approved July 10, 2018, effective November 2, 2018. Policy created with literature review through April 2018. Minimally invasive ablation procedures (eg, radiofrequency ablation and cryoablation) are considered investigational for the treatment of peripheral neuromas.</td>
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<tr>
<td>09/01/19</td>
<td>Annual Review, approved August 22, 2019. Policy updated with literature review through April 2019; no references added; Policy statement unchanged.</td>
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</table>

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW, Room 509F, HHH Building

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