MEDICAL POLICY – 7.01.148
Endovascular Therapies for Extracranial Vertebral Artery Disease

BCBSA Ref. Policy: 7.01.148
Effective Date: Aug. 1, 2018
Last Revised: July 25, 2018
Replaces: N/A

RELATED MEDICAL POLICIES:
None

Select a hyperlink below to be directed to that section.

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EVIDENCE REVIEW | REFERENCES | HISTORY

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Introduction

The vertebral arteries travel along the spine, up the back of the neck, and enter the brain. When one of these arteries is narrowed, blocked, or there is a bulge before it enters the brain, it’s known as extracranial vertebral artery disease. (Extracranial means outside the skull.) Treatment usually involves medication or surgery. Other techniques that are done inside the blood vessels are being studied. These techniques are known as endovascular therapies. An example of an endovascular therapy is placing a tiny tube inside a blocked artery to allow blood to flow through it. Endovascular therapy for extracranial vertebral artery disease is investigational. These techniques are still being studied to see if they are as effective as standard treatments.

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.
Endovascular therapy, including percutaneous transluminal angioplasty with or without stenting, is considered investigational for the management of extracranial vertebral artery disease.

Note: The extracranial vertebral artery is considered to be segments V1-V3 of the vertebral artery from its origin at the subclavian artery until it crosses the dura mater.

### Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0075T</td>
<td>Transcatheter placement of extracranial vertebral artery stent(s), including radiologic supervision and interpretation, open or percutaneous; initial vessel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0076T</td>
<td>Transcatheter placement of extracranial vertebral artery stent(s), including radiologic supervision and interpretation, open or percutaneous; each additional vessel (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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### Related Information

N/A

### Evidence Review
Description

Vertebral artery diseases, including atherosclerotic stenosis, dissections, and aneurysms, can lead to ischemia of the posterior cerebral circulation. Conventional management of extracranial vertebral artery diseases may include medical therapy (eg, antiplatelet or anticoagulant medications), medications to reduce atherosclerotic disease risk (eg, statins), and/or surgical revascularization. Endovascular therapies have been investigated as an alternative to conventional management.

Background

Vertebrobasilar Circulation Ischemia

Ischemia of the vertebrobasilar or posterior circulation accounts for about 20% of all strokes. Posterior circulation strokes may arise from occlusion of the innominate and subclavian arteries, the extracranial vertebral arteries, or the intracranial vertebral, basilar, or posterior cerebral arteries. Compared with carotid artery disease, relatively little is known about the true prevalence of specific causes of posterior circulation strokes, particularly the prevalence of vertebral artery disease. A report from a stroke registry, Gulli et al (2013), estimated that in 9% of cases posterior circulation strokes are due to stenosis of the proximal vertebral artery. Patients who experience strokes or transient ischemic attacks of the vertebrobasilar circulation face a 25% to 35% risk of stroke within the subsequent 5 years. In particular, the presence of vertebral artery stenosis increases the 90-day risk of recurrent stroke by about 4-fold.

Relevant Clinical Anatomy and Pathophysiology

Large artery disease of the posterior circulation may be due to atherosclerosis (stenosis), embolism, dissection, or aneurysms. In about a third of cases, posterior circulation strokes are due to stenosis of the extracranial vertebral arteries or the intracranial vertebral, basilar, and posterior cerebral arteries. The proximal portion of the vertebral artery in the neck is the most common location of atherosclerotic stenosis in the posterior circulation. Dissection of the extracranial or intracranial vertebral arteries may also cause posterior circulation ischemia. By contrast, posterior cerebral artery ischemic events are more likely to be secondary to embolism from more proximal vessels.

The vertebral artery is divided into 4 segments, V1-V4, of which segments V1-V3 are extracranial. V1 originates at the subclavian artery and extends to the C5 or C6 vertebrae; V2
crosses the bony canal of the transverse foramina from C2 to C5; V3 starts as the artery exits the transverse foramina at C2 and ends as the vessel crosses the dura matter and becomes an intracranial vessel. The most proximal segment (V1) is the most common location for atherosclerotic occlusive disease to occur, while arterial dissections are most likely to involve the extracranial vertebral artery just before the vessel crosses the dura mater. Compared with the carotid circulation, the vertebral artery system is more likely to be associated with anatomic variants, including a unilateral artery.

Atherosclerotic disease of the vertebral artery is associated with conventional risk factors for cerebrovascular disease. However, risk factors and the underlying pathophysiology of vertebral artery dissection and aneurysms differ. Extracranial vertebral artery aneurysms and dissections are most often secondary to trauma, particularly those with excessive rotation, distraction, or flexion/extension, or iatrogenic injury, such as during cervical spine surgeries. Spontaneous vertebral artery dissections are rare, and in many cases are associated with connective tissue disorders including Ehlers-Danlos syndrome type IV, Marfan syndrome, autosomal-dominant polycystic kidney disease, and osteogenesis imperfecta type I.\(^2\)

**Management of Extracranial Vertebral Artery Disease**

The optimal management of occlusive extracranial vertebral artery disease is not well defined. Medical treatment with antiplatelet or anticoagulant medications is a mainstay of therapy to reduce stroke risk. Medical therapy also typically involves risk reduction for classical cardiovascular risk factors. However, no randomized trials have compared specific antiplatelet or anticoagulant regimens.

Surgical revascularization may be used for vertebral artery atherosclerotic disease, but open surgical repair is considered technically challenging due to poor access to the vessel origin. Surgical repair may involve vertebral endarterectomy, bypass grafting, or transposition of the vertebral artery, usually to the common or internal carotid artery. Moderately sized single-center case series of surgical vertebral artery repair from 2012 and 2013 have reported overall survival rates of 91% and 77% at 3 and 6 years postoperatively, respectively, and arterial patency rates of 80% after 1 year of follow-up.\(^3,4\) Surgical revascularization may be used when symptomatic vertebral artery stenosis is not responsive to medical therapy, particularly when bilateral vertebral artery stenosis is present or when unilateral stenosis is present in the presence of an occluded or hypoplastic contralateral vertebral artery. Surgical revascularization may also be considered in patients with concomitant symptomatic carotid and vertebral disease who do not have relief of vertebrobasilar ischemia after carotid revascularization.
The management of extracranial vertebral artery aneurysms or dissections is controversial due to uncertainty about the risk of thromboembolic events associated with aneurysms and dissections. Antiplatelet therapy is typically used; surgical repair, which may include vertebral bypass, external carotid autograft, and vertebral artery transposition to the internal carotid artery, or endovascular treatment with stent placement or coil embolization, may also be used.

Given the technical difficulties related to surgically accessing the extracranial vertebral artery, endovascular therapies have been investigated for extracranial vertebral artery disease. Endovascular therapy may consist of percutaneous transluminal angioplasty, with or without stent implantation.

**Summary of Evidence**

For individuals with extracranial vertebral artery stenosis who receive percutaneous transluminal angioplasty with or without stent implantation, the evidence includes RCTs and noncomparative studies. Relevant outcomes are overall survival, symptoms, morbid events, and treatment-related mortality and morbidity. Two RCTs, the Vertebral Artery Stenting Trial and the Vertebral Artery Stenting Trial, found no advantage for endovascular intervention compared with best medical therapy alone. Evidence from noncomparative studies has shown that vertebral artery stenting can be performed with high rates of technical success and low periprocedural morbidity and mortality, and that vessel patency can be achieved in a high percentage of cases. However, long-term follow-up has demonstrated high rates of in-stent stenosis. The evidence is insufficient to determine the effects of the technology on health outcomes.

For individuals with extracranial vertebral artery aneurysm(s), dissection(s), and arteriovenous fistula(e) who receive percutaneous transluminal angioplasty with stent implantation, the evidence includes small case series and case reports. Relevant outcomes are overall survival, symptoms, morbid events, and treatment-related mortality and morbidity. The available evidence indicates that endovascular therapy for extracranial vertebral artery disorders other than stenosis is feasible and may be associated with favorable outcomes. However, given the lack of data comparing endovascular therapies to alternatives, the evidence is insufficient to permit conclusions about the efficacy of endovascular therapy for extracranial vertebral artery aneurysms, dissections, and arteriovenous fistulae. The evidence is insufficient to determine the effects of the technology on health outcomes.
Ongoing and Unpublished Clinical Trials

A search of ClinicalTrials.gov in April 2018 did not identify any ongoing or unpublished trials that would likely influence this review.

Practice Guidelines and Position Statements

American Heart Association and American Stroke Association

In 2014, the American Heart Association and American Stroke Association issued joint guidelines on prevention of stroke in patients with stroke and transient ischemic attack, which made the following recommendations about treatment of extracranial vertebrobasilar disease (see Table 1)²⁰.

Table 1. Guidelines on Stroke Prevention in Patients with Stroke and Transient Ischemic Attack

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<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
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<td>“Routine preventive therapy with emphasis on anti-thrombotic therapy, lipid lowering, BP control, and lifestyle optimization is recommended for all patients with recently symptomatic extracranial vertebral artery stenosis.”</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Endovascular stenting of patients with extracranial vertebral stenosis may be considered when patients are having symptoms despite optimal medical treatment.”</td>
<td>IIb</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Open surgical procedures, including vertebral endarterectomy and vertebral artery transposition, may be considered when patients are having symptoms despite optimal medical treatment.”</td>
<td>IIb</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BP: blood pressure; COR: class of recommendation; LOE: level of evidence.

American Stroke Association et al

In 2011, a multisociety task force issued guidelines on the management of extracranial vertebral and carotid artery disease, which made the following statements about catheter-based revascularization of extracranial vertebral artery disease: “Although angioplasty and stenting of the vertebral vessels are technically feasible, as for high-risk patients with carotid disease, there is insufficient evidence from randomized trials to demonstrate that endovascular management is
superior to best medical management.” No specific recommendations were made regarding endovascular therapies.

**Medicare National Coverage**

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services has a national coverage determination addressing the use of percutaneous transluminal angioplasty in the treatment of atherosclerotic obstructive lesions of the lower or the upper extremities (not including the head or neck vessels), of a single coronary artery, of renal arteries, and of arteriovenous dialysis fistulas and grafts. It also addresses the use of percutaneous transluminal angioplasty concurrent with carotid stent placement in Food and Drug Administration investigational device exemption clinical trials, in FDA-approved postapproval studies, and in patients at high risk for carotid endarterectomy.

The national coverage determination states that all other indications for percutaneous transluminal angioplasty, with or without stenting, to treat obstructive lesions of the vertebral and cerebral arteries remain non-covered.

**Regulatory Status**

Currently, no endovascular therapies have been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) specifically for treatment of extracranial vertebral artery disease.

Various stents, approved for use in the carotid or coronary circulation, have been used for extracranial vertebral artery disease. These stents may be self- or balloon-expandable.

Two devices have been approved by FDA through the humanitarian device exemption process for intracranial atherosclerotic disease. This form of FDA approval is available for devices used to treat conditions with an incidence of 4000 or less per year; FDA only requires data showing “probable safety and effectiveness.” Devices with their labeled indications are as follows:

1. Neurolink System® (Guidant). “The Neurolink system is indicated for the treatment of patients with recurrent intracranial stroke attributable to atherosclerotic disease refractory to medical therapy in intracranial vessels ranging from 2.5 to 4.5 mm in diameter with ≥50% stenosis and that are accessible to the stent system.”

to medical therapy, in intracranial vessels with ≥50% stenosis that are accessible to the system.”

References


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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SW, Room 509F, HHH Building
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Deutsche (German):

Getting Help in Other Languages

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