

# Occipital Nerve Injections and Ablation (Including Occipital Neuralgia and Headache)

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## Application

### UnitedHealthcare Commercial

This Medical Policy applies to all UnitedHealthcare Commercial benefit plans.

### UnitedHealthcare Individual Exchange

This Medical Policy applies to Individual Exchange benefit plans in all states except for Colorado.

## Coverage Rationale

The following are proven and medically necessary for treating pain due to malignancy involving the head and neck:

- Injection of local anesthetics and/or steroids used as greater occipital nerve blocks
- Occipital nerve ablation (destruction by neurolytic agent)

The following are unproven and not medically necessary for diagnosing and/or treating occipital neuralgia or headaches, including migraine and [Cervicogenic Headaches](#), due to insufficient evidence of efficacy:

- Injection of local anesthetics and/or steroids, used as greater occipital nerve blocks
- Neurostimulation or electrical stimulation
- Occipital [Neurectomy](#)
- Partial posterior intradural C1-C3 [Rhizotomy](#)
- Radiofrequency ablation (thermal or pulsed) or denervation
- Rhizotomy of C1-C3 spinal dorsal roots
- Surgical decompression of second cervical nerve root and ganglion
- Surgical decompression of the greater occipital nerve

## Definitions

**Cervicogenic Headache:** Referred pain perceived in the head from a source in the neck. In the case of Cervicogenic Headache, the cause is a disorder of the cervical spine and its component bony, disc and/or soft tissue elements. (American Migraine Foundation, 2016)

**Neurectomy:** Partial or total excision or resection of a nerve. (Taber's Medical Dictionary)

**Rhizotomy:** Surgical section of a nerve root to relieve pain. (Taber's Medical Dictionary)

## Applicable Codes

The following list(s) of procedure and/or diagnosis codes is provided for reference purposes only and may not be all inclusive. Listing of a code in this policy does not imply that the service described by the code is a covered or non-covered health service. Benefit coverage for health services is determined by the member specific benefit plan document and applicable laws that may require coverage for a specific service. The inclusion of a code does not imply any right to reimbursement or guarantee claim payment. Other Policies and Guidelines may apply.

CPT Code	Description
63185	Laminectomy with rhizotomy; 1 or 2 segments
63190	Laminectomy with rhizotomy; more than 2 segments
64405	Injection(s), anesthetic agent(s) and/or steroid; greater occipital nerve
64553	Percutaneous implantation of neurostimulator electrode array; cranial nerve
64555	Percutaneous implantation of neurostimulator electrode array; peripheral nerve (excludes sacral nerve)
64568	Open implantation of cranial nerve (e.g., vagus nerve) neurostimulator electrode array and pulse generator
64570	Removal of cranial nerve (e.g., vagus nerve) neurostimulator electrode array and pulse generator
64575	Open implantation of neurostimulator electrode array; peripheral nerve (excludes sacral nerve)
64590	Insertion or replacement of peripheral or gastric neurostimulator pulse generator or receiver, direct or inductive coupling
64633	Destruction by neurolytic agent, paravertebral facet joint nerve(s), with imaging guidance (fluoroscopy or CT); cervical or thoracic, single facet joint
64634	Destruction by neurolytic agent, paravertebral facet joint nerve(s), with imaging guidance (fluoroscopy or CT); cervical or thoracic, each additional facet joint (List separately in addition to code for primary procedure)
64722	Decompression; unspecified nerve(s) (specify)
64744	Transection or avulsion of; greater occipital nerve
64771	Transection or avulsion of other cranial nerve, extradural
64999	Unlisted procedure, nervous system

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HCPCS Code	Description
K1023	Distal transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulator, stimulates peripheral nerves of the upper arm
L8679	Implantable neurostimulator, pulse generator, any type
L8680	Implantable neurostimulator electrode, each
L8685	Implantable neurostimulator pulse generator, single array, rechargeable, includes extension

Diagnosis Code	Description
C76.0	Malignant neoplasm of head, face and neck
G89.3	Neoplasm related pain (acute) (chronic)

## Description of Services

Cervicogenic Headache and occipital neuralgia are conditions whose diagnosis and treatment have been gradually refined over the last several years. This terminology has come to refer to specific types of unilateral headache thought to arise from impingement or entrapment of the occipital nerves and/or the upper spinal vertebrae. Compression and injury of the occipital nerves within the muscles of the neck and compression of the second and third cervical nerve roots are generally felt to be responsible for the symptoms, including unilateral and occasionally bilateral head, neck, and arm pain. The criteria for diagnosis of these entities currently include those of the International Headache Society (IHS) and the Cervicogenic Headache International Study Group.

Various treatments have been advocated for Cervicogenic Headache and occipital neuralgia. Oral analgesics and anti-inflammatory agents are effective for some individuals, but there is a population of individuals who do not experience pain relief with these medications. Local injections or nerve blocks, epidural steroid injections, radiofrequency ablation of the planum nuchae, electrical stimulation, Rhizotomy, ganglionectomy, nerve root decompression, discectomy and spinal fusion have all been investigated in the treatment of headache and occipital neuralgia.

Since medications provide only temporary relief and may cause side effects, surgical treatments such as occipital Neurectomy and nerve decompression for migraine and other headaches have been developed as a potential means to permanently prevent or to produce long-term remissions from headaches.

Radiofrequency ablation is performed percutaneously. During the procedure, an electrode that generates heat produced by radio waves is used to create a lesion in a sensory nerve with the intent of inhibiting transmission of pain signal from the sensory nerve to the brain.

Neurostimulation or electrical stimulation is commonly used for control of chronic pain. Electrical stimulation can be delivered in three ways: transcutaneously, percutaneously, and using implantable devices. Peripherally implanted nerve stimulation entails the placement of electrodes on or near a selected peripheral nerve. Targets for stimulation include occipital nerves, auriculotemporal nerves, supraorbital nerves, and sphenopalatine ganglia.

## Clinical Evidence

### Greater Occipital Nerve Blocks (GONB), Diagnostic and Therapeutic

There is insufficient evidence that GONBs are effective as a specific diagnostic test for occipital neuralgia (ON) or headaches. The efficacy of local injection therapies for ON or cervicogenic headache and other headaches has not been established in well-designed clinical trials.

GONBs have been advocated as a diagnostic test for cervicogenic headache and ON. However, criteria and standards for diagnostic GONBs remain to be defined. There are no well-designed clinical trials that clearly indicate that injection of the greater occipital nerve (GON) can be used as a specific diagnostic test for headaches and ON.

Refer to the following website for diagnostic criteria for cervicogenic headache and ON: The International Classification of Headache Disorders, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Available at: <http://www.ihs-headache.org/ichd-guidelines>. (Accessed March 09, 2023)

In 2023, Hayes produced an Evidence Analysis Research Brief on Local Injection Therapy for Cervicogenic Headache and ON. According to the brief, which summarized the most recent evidence, there are published studies on local injection therapy for cervicogenic headache and ON. The new evidence consisted of systematic reviews with and without meta-analysis. Furthermore, there were no randomized controlled trials (RCTs), studies evaluating the therapy, or studies evaluating treatment guided by the therapy. Lastly, the brief concluded that there were no position statements or guidelines for the treatment, showing that the lack of available guidance appears to confer with no or unclear support for local injection therapy.

In a 2023 randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled study, Chowdhury and associates explored the use of greater occipital nerve blockade for preventing chronic migraine. The trial consisted of a baseline period of four weeks. Participants with chronic migraine were randomly assigned 1:1 with placebo. The participants obtained four-weekly bilateral greater occipital nerve blockades with either 2 ml of 2% (40 mg) lidocaine (active group n = 22) or 2 ml of 0.9% saline (placebo n = 22) injections for 12 weeks. The primary endpoint was the change from baseline across weeks 9-12 in the average number of headaches and migraine days. The key secondary endpoint was achieving a 50% reduction in headache days compared to baseline across weeks 9-12. Documenting and reporting serious adverse events were conducted to evaluate safety. The average headache and migraine days at baseline ( $\pm$ SD) were 23.4  $\pm$ 4.4 and 15.6  $\pm$ 5.7 days in the active group and 22.6  $\pm$ 5.0 and 14.6  $\pm$ 4.6 days in the placebo group, respectively. The active group had a considerable gain in least-squares mean reduction in the number of headaches and migraine days when compared to the placebo (-4.2 days [95% CI: -7.5 to -0.8; p = 0.018] and -4.7 days [95%CI: 7.7 to 1.7; p = 0.003], in that order). In the active group, 40.9% of individuals reached a  $\geq$  50% reduction in headache days versus 9.1% of those receiving a placebo (p = 0.024). There were 64 mild and transient adverse events recorded from 16 individuals in the active group and 15 in the placebo group, and no death or serious adverse events were reported. Four-weekly greater occipital nerve blockade with 2% lidocaine for 12 weeks was superior to placebo in reducing the average number of headaches and migraine days for individuals with chronic migraine and a good tolerability profile. The study does not represent individuals with a chronic migraine history of 2-4 preventive treatment failures, which limits the generalizability of study results. More robust trials with longer follow up are necessary to decide whether to use greater occipital nerve blockade to prevent chronic migraines.

In a 2022 systematic review with meta-analysis, Velásquez-Rimachi and colleagues evaluated evidence and quality assessment of GONB local anesthetic combined or not with corticosteroids to prevent chronic migraine. The authors measured efficacy by assessing the change from baseline in the intensity and frequency of headaches in the intervention group compared to the placebo at a one-time point. The meta-analysis was performed with random effect models and evaluated random errors with the trial-sequential analysis (TSA), the risk of bias (ROB) with the ROB2 tool, and the certainty of the evidence with Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development, and Evaluations (GRADE). The review uncovered 2864 studies that showed GONB reduced the intensity of headaches at the end of the first month (migraine days [MD]: -1.35, 95% CI: -2.12 to -0.59) and the second month (MD: -2.10, CI 95%: -2.94 to -1.26) as well as the frequency of headaches (first month: MD: -4.45 days, 95% CI: -6.56 to -2.34 days; second month: MD: -5.49, 95% CI -8.94 to -2.03 days). Corticosteroids did not show a significant decrease in the frequency of headaches during the first month of treatment (MD: -1.1 days, 95% CI: -4.1 to 1.8, p = .45). Adverse events between the groups were similar, and the exploratory TSA demonstrated inconclusive results. The authors concluded that the limited evidence shows that GONB with local anesthetics can reduce the frequency and intensity of headaches compared to a placebo and adding corticosteroids did not demonstrate any additional benefits. However, the quality of the evidence was deficient because of the substantial ROB and imprecision. Additionally, considering the TSA was inconclusive, more extensive, more specific trials are necessary.

Malekian et al. (2022) conducted a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial; individuals suffering from episodic migraines without aura were randomized to triamcinolone or lidocaine, triamcinolone plus lidocaine, or saline groups. Individuals were evaluated at baseline, one week, two weeks, and four weeks after the injection. All 55 participants who completed the study were assessed for severity, duration of headaches, and side effects. In all four groups, the ANOVA measures revealed that the severity and duration reduced considerably after the greater occipital block (p < 0.001, p = 0.001, respectively). No difference was shown amongst groups at any point during the study (p > 0.05). A considerable decrease in frequency compared to baseline (p = 0.002, p = 0.019) was noted for groups two and three with lidocaine as part of the injection in paired sample T-test. Reported side effects with an association with triamcinolone were seen in three participants. The authors concluded that greater occipital block with a local anesthetic reduces the number of attacks in episodic migraine. No injection was better than the placebo regarding the duration and severity of the headaches. The trial uncovered that all four types of injections used effectively decreased the severity and the duration of headaches in episodic migraines, and no block solution was better than the 0.9% saline solution as a placebo at any of the time points. The trial uncovered a significant decrease in headaches for individuals receiving lidocaine alone or combined with triamcinolone compared to 0.9% saline injection or triamcinolone. Further studies exploring whether these results were caused by the compressive effect of injected solution, or the placebo effect are necessary.

Hasırcı Bayır et al. (2022) conducted a retrospective review of patient records to examine the efficacy of GONB in adult patients with primary headaches. The study included 53 participants from a single center outpatient clinic who presented with episodic migraine (EM) (n = 36), tension-type headache (n = 12), chronic migraine (n = 4), or cluster headache (n = 1) and who completed a three-month follow-up visit. The study population was predominately female (86.79%), with a median age of 43.06

years. The participants underwent evaluation before and after receiving a GONB for headache type, attack duration, attack frequency, the severity of pain, and analgesic intake. Their initial values were compared with the follow-up values at months one, three, and six. The participants underwent GONB once a week for three weeks then once a month if they reported a decrease in the duration, severity, or frequency of headache for a maximum of six months based on their clinical responses. The authors reported that the migraine group showed a statistically significant decrease in Visual Analog Scale (VAS) scores, attack duration, the mean value of monthly number of attacks and analgesics taken at months compared to their initial scores. Participants in the tension-type headache group showed a statistically significant decrease in their VAS scores, attack durations, mean value of the monthly number of attacks, and analgesics taken compared to their initial scores at the end of the three month follow-up. The values for the tension-type headache group at six months were statistically not significant as only two of the 12 participants completed the six month follow-up. Limitations of the study include the small sizes of each headache type, the preponderance of female participants, the use of various concomitant medications during the trial by some participants, and the study design. The authors concluded that repetitive GONB is an effective treatment method for migraine and tension-type headaches.

In a meta-analysis aimed at evaluating the therapeutic effectiveness of GONB against post-dural puncture headache (PDPH), Chang et al. (2021) reviewed seven studies (four RCTs and three non-RCTs) to determine the severity of pain at 24 hours post-procedure. The authors defined intervention failure as repeated GONBs, the use of analgesics, or the need for an epidural blood patch. Secondary outcomes analyzed in this study included the impact of GONB on pain relief at one hour and 12 hours post-procedure. Their meta-analysis included 275 adult individuals, and the sample sizes of the included studies ranged from 16 to 90 participants. The authors found a moderate ROB among the non-RCT studies overall. They reported that the pooled results showed a lower mean pain score at 24 hours and at one hour and 12 hours post-procedure. The analysis also showed that using GONB also decreased the risk of intervention failure. Limitations noted by the authors included high heterogeneity among the study populations, the difference in treatment provided to the control groups (placebo, bed rest, hydration, oral analgesics), the small number of RCTs available for analysis, and the short-term follow-up of 24 hours. The authors concluded that their meta-analysis showed that GONB has a therapeutic effect up to 24 hours post-procedure against PDPH with a low risk of intervention failure. They recommended further large-scale studies to evaluate the therapeutic benefit of GONB beyond the acute phase of PDPH.

Caponnetto et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review to summarize the effectiveness and safety of GONBs in treating cervicogenic headaches. The authors included seven studies, five observational studies, and two non-RCTs with a total of 140 participants. Follow-ups for outcomes evaluation varied among the studies, ranging from 5 minutes to 9 months after the procedure. Pain intensity was evaluated through the Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) or the Numeric Pain Rating Scale (NPRS). The monthly mean frequency of pain was 27 days at baseline and changed to 3.2 after one week, 2.4 after two weeks, 3.6 after 1.5 months, and 2.3 after 3.5 months. In five studies, mean pain reduction ranged from 8.2 (at two weeks after the first block) to -0.1 (at one month after the third block). Three studies reported minor adverse events. The authors concluded that the limited available evidence suggested that GONBs effectively improve pain in patients with cervicogenic headache, both as acute and as a preventative treatment. The available studies were either observational, non-controlled, or non-randomized trials with low-level evidence. Larger and randomized studies are needed to confirm the efficacy of the procedure. (Author Lauretti et al. [2014], previously cited in this policy, is included in this study).

Friedman et al. (2020) conducted an RCT to determine whether GONB was as effective as intravenous (IV) metoclopramide for migraine. A double-dummy, double-blind, parallel-arm, non-inferiority study was conducted in two emergency departments (EDs). Individuals with moderate or severe intensity migraines were randomized to receive bilateral GONB, with each side administered 3 mL of bupivacaine 0.5% or metoclopramide 10 mg IV. The primary outcome was improvement in pain on a 0-10 scale between time 0 and 1 hour later. Secondary outcomes included sustained headache relief, defined as achieving and maintaining for 48 hours a headache level of mild or none without the use of additional analgesic medication and rescue medication in the ED. Over a 2.5-year study period, 99 participants were randomized, 51 to GONB and 48 to metoclopramide. Those who received the GONB reported a mean improvement of 5.0, and those who received metoclopramide reported a mean improvement of 6.1. Sustained headache relief was reported by 11/51 (22%) GONB and 18/47 (38%) metoclopramide patients. Of the 51 individuals with GONB, 17 (33%) required rescue medication in the ED vs. 8/48 (17%) metoclopramide patients. An adverse event was reported by 16/51 (31%) GONB patients and 18/48 (38%) metoclopramide patients. The authors concluded that GONB with bupivacaine was less efficacious than IV metoclopramide for the first-line treatment of migraine in the ED.

A 2019 Hayes Health Technology Assessment report focused on the efficacy and safety of GONB for the preventive treatment of chronic migraine headaches for individuals with an inadequate response to standard care. GONB with an injection of a local

anesthetic is relatively safe and may improve most headache outcomes over the short term compared with placebo. Little to no evidence meeting inclusion criteria was found around benefit of chronic use of this therapy. There is a need for additional, larger, well-designed controlled trials with longer follow-up to adequately determine the optimal clinical role of GONB in the preventive treatment of chronic migraine. There was small or insufficient evidence for the use of GONB for the prevention of debilitating symptoms of EM or transformed migraine in adults who do not respond adequately to standard therapy. An updated literature search was performed by Hayes in October 2021 that found one newly published study that met the inclusion criteria; however, the data did not result in a change to their report recommendations. The overall quality of the body of evidence remained rated as low due to individual study limitations, some inconsistencies in outcomes, and imprecision in some comparisons or outcomes examined in only a few studies or a single study. In the 2022 annual review, an updated literature search was performed by Hayes, uncovering one newly published study meeting the inclusion criteria. Hayes did not change their rating, which is based on low-quality evidence that suggests GONB with an injection of a local anesthetic is relatively safe and could improve most headache outcomes over the short term when compared to placebo. The low rating reflects the heterogeneity in the patient populations and varying treatment protocols across studies. Additionally, there is little to no evidence that meets the inclusion criteria that found a benefit for chronic therapy use. The review again concluded that there is a need for added, well-designed controlled trials that have a longer follow-up to determine the optimal clinical role of GONB for preventing chronic migraines. Similarly, for the use of GONB in preventing debilitating symptoms of EM or transformed migraine in adults who do not respond to standard therapy, the review rating remained low based on the paucity of evidence on these types of migraines (Hayes, 2019b, updated 2022).

A systematic review and meta-analysis were conducted by Shauly et al. (2019) to determine the efficacy of GONB in the treatment of chronic migraine headaches. Nine studies were analyzed that reported mean number of headache days per month in both intervention and control groups. The study included 440 participants (intervention, n = 224; control, n = 216). Six of the included RCTs reported intervention treatment as either bupivacaine or lidocaine versus saline injection. Three of the included RCTs reported intervention treatment as corticosteroid in addition to bupivacaine or lidocaine versus bupivacaine or lidocaine with saline as the control group. Eight of the studies that were analyzed reported the mean headache days per month in both intervention and control groups. A total of 417 individuals were studied, with a pooled mean difference of -3.6 headache days (95 percent CI, -1.39 to -5.81 headache days;  $p < 0.00001$ ). Pooled mean difference in pain scores of -2.2 (95 percent CI, -1.56 to -2.84) also demonstrated a decrease in headache severity compared with controls ( $p < 0.0121$ ). Seven of the studies assessed reported mean VAS pain scores. Pooled mean difference in pain scores of -2.2 (95 percent CI, -1.56 to -2.84;  $p = 0.0121$ ). Two studies also reported patients that experienced a greater than 50 percent reduction in headache frequency. Risk ratios were calculated in these two studies, and the average risk ratio was found to be 0.76 (95 percent CI, 0.97 to 0.55;  $p < 0.00001$ ). The authors concluded that greater occipital nerve blocking should be recommended for use in migraine patients, particularly those that may require future surgical intervention. The block may act as steppingstone for patients experiencing migraine headache because of its usefulness for potentially assessing surgical candidates for nerve decompression. The included studies had some limitations. For one, those in the control group in three of these studies were also given bupivacaine or lidocaine, whereas the intervention included corticosteroids. Variations between the control and intervention groups may skew the results of the meta-analysis. Another limitation of this study is the quality of included studies. Most of the included studies exhibited a relatively small sample population. Clinical trials with a much larger sample population and longer period of observation should be conducted.

Özer et al. (2019) performed a study aimed to evaluate the efficacy of GON and supraorbital nerve (SON) blockade with local anesthetics for the preventive treatment of migraine without aura. Eighty-seven individuals diagnosed with migraine without aura (MWOA) were included in the study and randomly divided. One group was injected with 1% lidocaine; the other group was injected with 0.9% saline. GON and SON injections were done bilaterally. The injections were repeated weekly for three weeks. Participants were followed up for two months to assess clinical response. Seventy-one participants completed the study. After two months, the number of headache days decreased from  $12.8 \pm 10.9$  to  $5.3 \pm 7.4$ , and VAS decreased from  $8.3 \pm 1.0$  to  $5.5 \pm 1.9$  in the blockade group. The number of headache days decreased from  $12.4 \pm 10.3$  to  $7.5 \pm 7.2$ , and VAS decreased from  $8.2 \pm 1.1$  to  $7.4 \pm 1.3$  in the placebo group. Response was seen in 65.1% of the patients in the blockade group (65.4% for episodic migraine, 64.7% for chronic migraine) and 28.6% in the placebo group. The authors reported that the results suggest that GON and SON blockade with lidocaine was more effective than the placebo in the prophylactic treatment of both episodic and chronic migraine.

A retrospective study was performed by Gönen et al. (2019), which included 51 individuals with episodic and chronic cluster headache that underwent greater occipital nerve blockade with a single dose of rapid and long-acting steroid injection without additional prophylactic treatment. Pain assessment was performed using the VAS. The participants were asked to keep a

record of the frequency, severity, and duration of attacks after greater occipital nerve blockade. In 28 (54.9%) individuals, no attack occurred after greater occipital nerve blockade, and cluster bouts were halted. Mean duration of attacks was 86.67 ±37.45 min before the treatment. In the 23 individuals that had at least one attack after greater occipital nerve blockade, the mean duration of attacks was 31.73 ±36.10 min between post-treatment days 0-3, 29.35 ±40.49 min between post-treatment days 4-10, 28.48 ±42.17 min between post-treatment days 11-28, and 35.65 ±46.55 min after the post-treatment day 28 ( $p < 0.001$ ). Between post-treatment days 0-3, the VAS score was 0 in 70.6% ( $n = 36$ ), between 1 and 5 in 13.7% ( $n = 7$ ), and between 6 and 10 in 15.7% ( $n = 8$ ) of the participants. Between post-treatment days 4-10, the VAS score was 0 in 76.5% ( $n = 39$ ), between 1 and 5 in 7.8% ( $n = 4$ ), and between 6 and 10 in 15.7% ( $n = 8$ ) of the patients. Between post-treatment days 11-28, the VAS score was 0 in 80.4% ( $n = 41$ ), between 1 and 5 in 3.9% ( $n = 2$ ), and between 6 and 10 in 15.7% ( $n = 8$ ) of the individuals. After the post-treatment day 28, the VAS score was 0 in 86.3% ( $n = 44$ ) and between 6 and 10 in 13.7% ( $n = 7$ ) of the participants. The authors concluded that greater occipital nerve blockade is a practical, reliable, and cost-effective treatment option for individuals with episodic and chronic cluster headache. The study is limited by its retrospective observations and small sample size.

A systematic review and meta-analysis were conducted by Zhang et al. (2018) to investigate the impact of GONB on pain management of migraine. Seven RCTs ( $n=323$ ) assessing the efficacy of GONB versus placebo for migraine were included. The primary outcome was pain intensity. The authors concluded that GONB intervention can significantly reduce pain intensity and analgesic medication consumption but has no remarkable impact on headache duration and adverse events compared with control intervention for individuals with a migraine. The analysis was based on only seven RCTs, with relatively small sample size ( $n < 100$ ) and short follow-up time.

A prospective-randomized controlled study was conducted by Korucu et al. (2018) to evaluate the effectiveness of a greater occipital nerve blockade against a placebo and classical treatments (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and metoclopramide) among patients who were admitted to the ED with acute migraine headaches. Sixty participants were randomly assigned to three treatment groups: the greater occipital nerve blockade group (nerve blockade with bupivacaine), the placebo group (injection of normal saline into the GON area), and the IV treatment group (IV dexketoprofen and metoclopramide). The pain severity was assessed at 5, 15, 30, and 45-minutes with a 10-point pain scale score (PSS). The mean decreases in the 5-, 15-, 30-, and 45-minutes PSS scores were more significant in the greater occipital nerve blockade group than in the dexketoprofen and placebo groups. The authors concluded that a greater occipital nerve blockade was as effective as an IV dexketoprofen + metoclopramide treatment and superior to a placebo for individuals with acute migraine headaches. No follow-up was noted.

Tang et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis to explore the efficacy of GONB in migraine patients. Six RCTs assessing the efficacy of GONB versus placebo in migraine patients were included. Compared with control intervention in migraine patients, GONB intervention was found to significantly reduce pain score, number of headache days, and medication consumption but demonstrated no influence on duration of headache per four weeks. The authors concluded that GON block intervention can significantly alleviate pain, reduce the number of headache days and medication consumption, but have no significant influence on the duration of headache per four weeks for migraine patients. The short-term follow-up did not allow for assessment of intermediate and long-term outcomes.

Gul et al. (2017) evaluated the efficacy of greater occipital nerve blockade for individuals with chronic migraine in randomized control study. The study included 44 individuals with chronic migraine who were randomly divided onto two groups: group A (bupivacaine) and group B (placebo). greater occipital nerve blockade was administered four times (once per week) with bupivacaine or saline. After four weeks of treatment, patients were followed up for three months, and findings were recorded once every month for comparing each month's values with the pretreatment values. The primary endpoint was the difference in the frequency of headache (headache days/month). The VAS pain scores were also recorded. No severe adverse effects were reported. Group A showed a significant decrease in the frequency of headache and VAS scores at the first, second, and third months of follow-up. Group B showed a significant decrease in the frequency of headache and VAS scores at the first month of follow-up, but second and third months of follow-up showed no significant difference. The authors concluded that their results suggest that greater occipital nerve blockade with bupivacaine was superior to placebo, has long-lasting effect than placebo, and was found to be effective for the treatment of chronic migraine. More studies are needed to better define the safety and cost-effectiveness of greater occipital nerve blockade in chronic migraine.

Cuadrado et al. (2017) assessed the short-term clinical efficacy of GON anesthetic blocks in chronic migraine in a double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled clinical trial. Thirty-six women with chronic migraine were treated either with bilateral GON

block with bupivacaine 0.5% (n = 18) or a sham procedure with normal saline (n = 18). Headache frequency was recorded a week after and before the procedure. Pressure pain thresholds (PPTs) were measured in cephalic points (supraorbital, infraorbital, and mental nerves) and extracephalic points (hand, leg) just before the injection (T0), one hour later (T1) and one week later (T2). Anesthetic block was superior to placebo in reducing the number of days per week with moderate-or-severe headache, or any headache. Overall, PPTs increased after anesthetic block and decreased after placebo; after the intervention, PPT differences between baseline and T1/T2 among groups were statistically significant for the supraorbital and infraorbital sites. The authors concluded that GON anesthetic blocks appear to be effective in the short term in chronic migraine, as measured by a reduction in the number of days with moderate-to-severe headache or any headache during the week following injection. This study was limited by its heterogeneous patient population and small sample size.

A systematic review was conducted by Yang et al. (2016) to evaluate the clinical efficacy and safety of occipital nerve stimulation (ONS) for treating migraine. Five RCTs, four retrospective studies, and one prospective study met the inclusion criteria. The authors concluded that results from the retrospective studies and case series indicated that ONS significantly reduced the pain intensity and the number of days with headache in patients with migraine. The evidence of ONS efficacy established by RCTs was limited. Improvement was noted in the migraine disability assessment (MIDAS) score and SF-36 score at follow-up. The mean complication incidence of ONS was 66% for the reviewed studies. The authors recommended that future clinical studies should optimize and standardize the ONS intervention process and identify the relationship among the surgical process, efficacy, and complications resulting from the procedure.

Voigt and Murphy (2015) conducted a systematic literature review of the available evidence regarding the use of occipital nerve blocks (ONBs) for the management of acute headaches and then determined its potential for use in the emergency care setting. Techniques, medication selection, adverse reactions, frequency of use, candidates, and measures that can help improve safety were reviewed in order to better evaluate the usefulness of this tool in emergency care. The authors utilized the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force grading of evidence definitions and created the following grades based on available research for the use of ONBs in the treatment of various types of headaches: Cluster headache B (Moderate), Cervicogenic headache B (Moderate), Migraine headache C (Low), Tension-type headache I (insufficient evidence), Hemicrania continua I (insufficient evidence), and Chronic daily headache C (Low). The authors concluded that current evidence supports that ONBs can be delivered safely in an outpatient setting by providers trained in and have practiced this procedure. According to the authors, current evidence supports that ONBs can be useful in treating acute headaches in an emergency care setting, although additional research is needed.

Palamar et al. (2015) performed a prospective, randomized, placebo-controlled, double-blind pilot trial to compare the effectiveness of ultrasound-guided GONB using bupivacaine 0.5% and placebo on clinical improvement for individuals with refractory MWOA. Thirty-two patients with a diagnosis of MWOA were randomly assigned to receive either GONB with local anesthetic (bupivacaine 0.5% 1.5 mL) or GON injection with normal saline (0.9% 1.5 mL). The treatment group consisted of 11 individuals, and the placebo group was comprised of 12 patients. The ultrasound-guided GONB was performed to accurately locate the nerve. Headache severity was assessed with the VAS from 0 (no pain) to 10 (intense pain). In both groups, a decrease in headache intensity on the injection side was observed during the first post-injection week and continued until the second week. After the second week in the treatment group, the improvement continued, and the VAS score was increased at the end of the fourth week. In the placebo group, the VAS score increased and nearly reached the pre-injection levels after the second week. The decrease in the monthly average pain intensity score on the injected side was statistically significant in the treatment group, but not in the placebo group. The authors noted that ultrasound-guided GONB with bupivacaine for the treatment of migraine patients is a safe, simple, and effective technique without severe adverse effects. This trial included a small sample with a short follow-up duration. Individuals were followed for one month after the injection, so long-term effects have not been observed.

In a multicenter, double-blind, randomized placebo-controlled crossover trial, Inan et al. (2015) evaluated the safety and efficacy of unilateral GONB for 84 individuals with chronic migraine at one, two, and three-month follow-ups. Participants were randomly assigned to either an intervention group (A) and received GONB with injections of 0.5% bupivacaine (n = 42) or a placebo group (B) receiving 2.5 mL saline (n = 42) once a week for four weeks. After four weeks, the study was unblinded and patients in the placebo group were crossed over to GONB with bupivacaine once per week for eight weeks. Patients in the intervention group were followed for four weeks, and GONB was repeated with bupivacaine. After one month of treatment, the number of headache days had decreased from 16.9 ±5.7 to 13.2 ±6.7 in group A and from 18.1 ±5.3 to 8.8 ±4.8 in group B. The mean duration of headache (hours) had decreased from 25.9 ±16.3 to 19.3 ±11.5 in group A and from 24.2 ±13.7 to 21.2 ±13.4 in group B. The VAS score was significantly lower in the intervention group. After two months of treatment, when the placebo



group received active treatment, the mean number of headache days decreased to 6.6 ±4.7 in group A and to 8.4 ±5.0 in group B. After three months, headache frequency had decreased significantly in group A (5.5 ±4.0), and in group B (6.7 ±5.2) but the difference between the groups was not significant. The mean duration of headache (hours) had decreased to 14.0 ±10.4 in the group A, and to 15.1±8.9 in group B. The difference was not significant between the groups. After three months of treatment, the hours had declined further to a mean of 10.0 ±6.2 in group A, and 10.8 ±5.9 in group B but again, the difference was not significant between the two groups. The mean VAS score improved in both the intervention and placebo groups with similar improvements in the two groups. The authors stated the evidence suggests that GONB with bupivacaine relieves migraine headache symptoms and reduces the frequency of the attacks compared with a placebo. This was confirmed when the placebo patients crossed over to active treatment and experienced significant symptom relief. The study is limited by its small sample size, short follow-up time, and short duration of the double-blind phase.

Dilli et al. (2014) evaluated the efficacy of ONB with local anesthetic and corticosteroid for the preventive treatment of migraine. Patients between 18 and 75 years old with International Classification of Headache Disorders (ICHD)-defined episodic (> one attack per week) or chronic migraine were randomized to receive either 2.5 ml 0.5% bupivacaine plus 0.5 ml (20 mg) methylprednisolone over the ipsilateral (unilateral headache) or bilateral (bilateral headache) occipital nerve (ON) or 2.75 ml normal saline plus 0.25 ml 1% lidocaine without epinephrine (placebo). Patients completed a one-month headache diary prior to and after the double-blind injection. The primary outcome measure was defined as a 50% or greater reduction in the frequency of days with moderate or severe migraine headache in the four-week post-injection compared to the four-week pre-injection baseline period. Thirty-four patients received active, and 35 individuals received placebo treatment. Because of missing data, the full analysis of 33 individuals in the active and 30 patients in the placebo group was analyzed for efficacy. In the active and placebo groups, respectively, the mean frequency of at least moderate (mean 9.8 versus 9.5) and severe (3.6 versus 4.3) migraine days and acute medication days (7.9 versus 10.0) were not substantially different at baseline. The percentage of patients with at least a 50% reduction in the frequency of moderate or severe headache days was 30% for both groups. The authors concluded that greater ONB does not reduce the frequency of moderate to severe migraine days in patients with episodic or chronic migraine compared to placebo.

Kashipazha et al. (2014) conducted a randomized, double-blinded controlled trial to evaluate the therapeutic efficacy of GONB on 48 patients suffering from migraine headaches. A syringe containing 1.0 mL of lidocaine 2%, 0.5 mL of either saline (control group, n = 24) or triamcinolone 0.5 mL (intervention group, n = 24) was prepared for each patient. Patients were assessed prior to the injection and two weeks, one month, and two months thereafter for severity and frequency of pain, times to use analgesics and any appeared side effects. No significant differences were revealed in pain severity, pain frequency, and analgesics use between the two groups at the four study time points including at baseline, and two, four, and eight weeks after the intervention. However, in both groups, the indices of pain severity, pain frequency, and analgesics use were significantly reduced at the three-time points after the intervention compared with before the intervention. The authors concluded that GONB with triamcinolone in combination with lidocaine or normal saline with lidocaine results in reducing pain severity and frequency as well as use of analgesics up to two months after the intervention; however, any difference attributed to the drug regimens by assessing of the trend of pain characteristics changes. These findings require confirmation in a larger study.

Other studies have been performed that indicate that GONBs may be an effective treatment for individuals with migraine post-concussive or other headaches; however, these studies had small sample sizes or did not have control groups (Niraj, 2014; Govindappagari, 2014; Seeger, 2014; Guerrero, 2012;). The American Headache Society Special Interest Section for peripheral nerve blocks (PNBs) and other Interventional Procedures (AHS-IPS) developed a narrative review describing a standardized methodology for the performance of PNBs in the treatment of headache disorders. PNBs described included greater occipital, lesser occipital, supratrochlear, supraorbital, and auriculotemporal injections. The indications for PNB may include select primary headache disorders, secondary headache disorders, and cranial neuralgias. According to the authors, there is a paucity of evidence from controlled studies for the use of PNBs in the treatment of primary and secondary headache disorders, with the exception of greater occipital nerve blockade for cluster headaches. The AHS-IPS indicated that further research may result in the revision of these recommendations to improve the outcome and safety of this treatment modality for headache.

Lambro et al. (2014) prospectively assessed the efficacy and consistency of response to greater occipital nerve blockade in a series of 83 individuals with chronic cluster headache. After the first GONB, a positive response was observed in 47 (57%) participants: 35 (42%) were rendered pain free, 12 (15%) had a partial benefit and one patient obtained < 50% improvement. The duration of a positive response lasted a median of 21 days (range 7-504 days). There was a transient worsening of condition in 6% of patients. The overall rate and average duration of response remained consistent after the second [n = 37; 31 responders (84%); median duration 21 days], third [n = 28; 20 responders (71%); median duration 25 days]

and fourth [n = 14; 10 responders (71%); median duration 23 days] injections. The authors concluded that GONB seems to be an efficacious treatment with reproducible effects for individuals with chronic cluster headache. According to the authors, when performed three times monthly, GONB may have a useful role in the management of chronic cluster headache. The lack of a control group limits the validity of the results of this study.

## **Surgical Treatment of Occipital Neuralgia or Cervicogenic Headache**

A number of different surgical procedures, such as dorsal nerve root section, occipital neurectomy, partial posterior rhizotomy, cervical spine disc excision with fusion, and surgical nerve release, have been studied for the treatment of ON and cervicogenic headache.

The available evidence is insufficient to conclude that surgery is an effective treatment for ON or cervicogenic headaches. The long-term efficacy of surgical procedures for ON or cervicogenic headaches has not been established in well-designed clinical trials.

Goyal et al. (2022) performed a systematic review to evaluate various interventional treatment for cervicogenic headache and compare their relative efficacies. The final analysis consisted of 23 articles published between January 2001 and March 2021. Eleven studies evaluated the effect of radiofrequency ablation (RFA); five evaluated ONB, two for facet joint injections, two for cervical epidural injection, and two for cryoneurolysis. The ONB (GON, LON) showed only limited evidence, as most of the studies were non-controlled and yielded only transient benefits. Radiofrequency lesioning may be preferable over other interventions because of its long duration of effect, better efficacy, and fewer side effects. Conventional RFA is neuro-destructive and is associated with high complication rates such as neuritis or deafferentation pain. The authors noted several limitations in their review including the lack of available RCTs, the structure, the heterogeneity of the inclusion/exclusion criteria and outcomes assessed among the studies, the small sample sizes and short follow-up periods in the studies and the flaws and inconsistencies in some of the study designs. Based on available literature, the authors concluded that ONB may be a reasonable option for cervicogenic headache treatment. Radiofrequency lesioning was found to be better with long-term positive outcomes, and pulsed therapy had better safety. However, the review revealed only limited evidence, and additional large, prospective, well-designed RCTs are needed to provide more concrete evidence and to establish relative efficacy of the various available interventions discussed for the management of cervicogenic headache.

A systematic review and meta-analysis to evaluate the proportion of individuals with migraine reporting elimination of migraine headache (MH) after migraine trigger site surgery and whether surgery compared to sham or no surgery is more effective in the elimination of MH was conducted by Vincent et al. (2019). A total number of 627 participants with a diagnosis of migraine in compliance with the classification of the International Headache Society (IHS) were included. The treatment consisted of one or more surgical procedures involving the extracranial nerves and/or arteries with outcome data available at minimum six months. A proportion of 0.38 of participants (random effects model, 95% CI [0.30–0.46]) experienced elimination of migraine headaches at 6–12 months follow-up. Using data from three RCTs, the calculated odds ratio for 90–100% elimination of migraine headaches is 21.46 (random effects model, 95% CI [5.64–81.58]) for individuals receiving migraine surgery compared to sham or no surgery. The authors reported that migraine surgery leads to elimination of migraine headaches in 38% of migraine patients. However, more elaborate randomized trials are needed with transparent reporting of patient selection, medication use, and surgical procedures and implementing detailed and longer follow-up times.

Gande et al. (2016) performed a retrospective chart review of 75 individuals with ON who underwent cervical dorsal root rhizotomy (CDR). Fifty-five patients were included who met the IHS diagnostic criteria for ON, responded to CT-guided nerve blocks at the C-2 dorsal nerve root, and had at least one follow-up visit. Telephone interviews were additionally used to obtain data on patient satisfaction. The average follow-up was 67 months (range 5-150). Etiologies of ON included the following: idiopathic (44%), posttraumatic (27%), postsurgical (22%), post-cerebrovascular accident (4%), postherpetic (2%), and post-viral (2%). At last follow-up, 35 participants (64%) reported full pain relief, 11 (20%) partial relief, and seven (16%) no pain relief. The extent of pain relief after CDR was not significantly associated with ON etiology. Of 37 p whose satisfaction-related data were obtained, 25 (68%) reported willingness to undergo repeat surgery for similar pain relief, while 11 (30%) reported no such willingness; a single patient (2%) did not answer this question. Twenty-one individuals (57%) reported that their activity level/functional state improved after surgery, five (13%) reported a decline, and 11 (30%) reported no difference. The most common acute postoperative complications were infections in 9% (n = 5) and CSF leaks in 5% (n = 3); chronic complications included neck pain/stiffness in 16% (n = 9) and upper-extremity symptoms in 5% (n = 3) such as trapezius weakness, shoulder pain, and arm paresthesia. The authors concluded that CDR provides an efficacious means for pain relief in patients with

medically refractory ON. In the appropriately selected patient, it may lead to optimal outcomes with a relatively low risk of complications. The study is limited by its retrospective observations.

Excision of intervertebral discs from the cervical spine with interbody fusion was evaluated in two prospective case series by the same authors. For individuals with bilateral cervicogenic headache (n = 28), 64% reported relief of pain after surgery, and the mean duration of improvement was 22.7 months. In 36% of participants, immediate pain reduction was followed by recurrences starting at two months after surgery (Jansen & Sjaastad, 2006). For individuals with unilateral cervicogenic headache, these same authors reported that all patients were generally pain-free during the one to three month period when the individuals wore cervical collars restricting movement, but only five out of 32 individuals remained pain-free three years after surgery. The mean duration of improvement was 14.8 months (range, 1 to 58 months) (Jansen & Sjaastad, 2007). In another study, Jansen (2008) summarized the results of cervical disc removal in 60 individuals with long-lasting severe unilateral (n = 32) or bilateral (n = 28) cervicogenic headache unresponsive to other treatment options. Sixty-three per cent of the unilateral and 64% of the bilateral cases had long-lasting pain freedom or improvement. After secondary deterioration (in 37% of individuals with unilateral and in 36% with bilateral cervicogenic headache (CEH) and further treatments, the final mean improvement was 73% and 66%, respectively. The mean observation time was short (19.8 to 25.5 months). The small sample size limits these conclusions. These conclusions are limited by the small sample size in the reported studies.

In a prospective study, Diener et al. (2007) investigated whether cervical disc prolapse can cause cervicogenic headache. The study included 50 participants with cervical disc prolapse who were prospectively followed for three months. Data regarding headache and neck pain were collected prior to and seven and 90 days after surgery for the disc prolapse. Fifty individuals with lumbar disc prolapse, matched for age and sex, undergoing surgery were recruited as controls. Twelve of 50 individuals with cervical disc prolapse reported new headache and neck pain. Seven individuals (58%) fulfilled the 2004 IHS criteria for cervicogenic headache. One week after surgery, 8/12 individuals with cervical disc prolapse and headache reported to be pain-free. One individual was improved and three were unchanged. Three months after cervical prolapse surgery, seven individuals were pain-free, three improved and two unchanged. According to the authors, this prospective study shows an association of low cervical prolapse with cervicogenic headache: headache and neck pain improves or disappears in 80% of individuals after surgery for the cervical disc prolapse. These findings require confirmation in a more extensive study.

## **Nerve Decompression and Occipital Neurectomy for Headaches**

The available evidence is insufficient to conclude that occipital neurectomy or nerve decompression, including decompression of the supraorbital, supratrochlear, zygomaticotemporal, or GONs, is an effective treatment for headaches. The long-term efficacy of these procedures for headaches has not been established in well-designed clinical trials.

In a single-center retrospective cohort study involving 154 individuals with recurrent migraine headaches lasting for over two years, Chen et al. (2021) examined the feasibility of scalp (trigger areas) nerve decompression as a treatment for the management of refractory chronic migraine (rCM). The authors divided the trigger areas according to the nerve compromised as frontal (supraorbital nerve), temporal (auriculotemporal nerve) or occipital (greater occipital nerve) as determined by the location that the patient identified as the headache start site or the most tender spot along the migraine headache zone. The study group included 91 (59.09%) patients (69 men and 85 women) with a mean age at treatment of 47 years who underwent auriculotemporal nerve decompression, 27 (13.63%) had SON decompression, 15 (9.74%) had GON decompression, and the remaining 21 (13.63%) patients had more than one nerve decompression performed. Postoperative outcome was assessed by two neurosurgeons on days 1, 3, and 7, and at 6 months and one year. The authors reported that 96 (62.2%) of individuals were considered cured at one-year follow-up or latest follow-up (complete resolution of initial symptoms and pain, and were free of postoperative discomfort), another 29 individuals (18.83%) reported improvement in their symptoms with decrease in the intensity and frequency of headaches more than 50% from the initial presentation and require no medication, 21 individuals (13.64%) had a partial symptomatic remission with a decrease in intensity and frequency of headaches of less than 50% and that required adjuvant medical treatment, and five people (3.25%) reported no change to their symptoms. Limitations noted by the authors included the retrospective nature of their study, the lack of control group, and the subjective nature of the questionnaire used to measure clinical outcome. The authors concluded that nerve decompression of trigger site areas (frontal, temporal and/or occipital) by removal of tissue, muscle and vessels for individuals with medically rCM is a feasible alternative treatment modality with a high success rate of up to 80.5%. They recommend future studies that include the use of a more detailed and objective post-procedural evaluation tool.

McNutt et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of 12 articles (including Pisapia [2012], Ducic et al. [2009], Ducic et al. [2014], Choi [2015], Jose et al. [2018], and Li et al. [2012] below) that directly addressed the question of neurolysis (NL) versus

neurectomy (NR) for the treatment of ON after failure of conservative therapy to provide clarity regarding differences between the two approaches and a recommendation on the superiority of one treatment over the other. The articles included seven observational studies and five single case reports as no RCTs were identified in their literature search and all were found to be level IV, low-quality evidence so they were unable to complete a meta-analysis. There was a total of 473 participants in the analysis with follow-up between two months and 5.6 years. Their analysis showed that individuals had a positive outcome when they had a positive response to GONB or Botox, tenderness over the GON and were under the care of a neurology specialist or pain specialist; however, the longer duration of the headache (greater than 13 years) and retro-orbital/frontal radiation were associated with treatment failure. The authors noted that the included studies utilized various inclusion and exclusion criteria as well as outcome measures. Other limitations they noted included the number of case reports, lack of comparison group in many studies, high dropout rates, small sample sizes, lack of blinding and a lack of correlating outcomes to a particular surgical treatment. After reviewing the data, the authors found there was conflicting results for NL and no consistent outcome identified for NR. They found that many patients had concomitant headache diagnoses and additional confabulators and they were not screened for other causes of occipital headache. The authors determined there was insufficient evidence to recommend one treatment method over the other. The authors stated that higher-quality studies including RCTs are needed to evaluate these surgical options.

A systematic review and meta-analysis were conducted by Baldelli et al. (2020). The nine selected studies included seven retrospective studies (4 case-control; 3 case series), one blinded randomized controlled clinical trial, and one a prospective cohort study. A total of 1135 individuals were included in studies on occipital nerve decompression with different surgical techniques. The sample size of each study ranged from 11 to 476. Surgical outcome was measured with the migraine headache questionnaire, the percentage of postoperatively pain relief, and the migraine headache index (MHI). Follow-up was at least six months in each study. General positive response after surgery (> 50% reduction in occipital migraine headaches) ranged from 80.0% to 94.9%. The authors concluded that success in occipital decompression surgery is high, surpassing 90% in several studies but other randomized clinical trials are necessary to definitively confirm the findings. A main limitation is the retrospective nature of most of the studies. (Authors Ducic et al. [2009] and Guyuron et al. [2009], which were previously cited in this policy, are included in this study).

Ambrosini and Schoenen (2016) performed a meta-analysis of studies assessing (minimally) invasive interventions targeting pericranial nerves that could be effective in refractory patients. These included nerve blocks/infiltrations, the percutaneous implantation of neurostimulators, and surgical decompression procedures. The authors concluded that the clinical implications for these treatments are as follows:

- Suboccipital infiltrations (or GONBs) are effective, evidence-based, safe, and inexpensive treatments for short-term prophylaxis in cluster headache patients, while evidence for such an effect is weak in migraine.
- Percutaneous ONS has long-term efficacy in refractory chronic cluster headache, but it has frequent adverse effects, and a sham-controlled trial is not yet available.
- Surgical decompression of pericranial nerves for individuals with migraines were reported to be superior to sham surgery in one study, and most case series are non-controlled and published by the same group. Further better-designed RCTs are needed before surgical decompressions can be recommended to treat selected individuals with migraines.

Guyuron et al. (2011) assessed the long-term efficacy of surgical deactivation of migraine headache trigger sites. One hundred twenty-five volunteers were randomly assigned to the treatment (n = 100) or control group (n = 25) after examination by the team neurologist to ensure a diagnosis of migraine headache. Patients were asked to complete the Medical Outcomes Study 36-Item Short Form Health Survey, Migraine-Specific Quality of Life, and MIDAS before treatment and at 12- and 60-month postoperative follow-up. The treatment group received botulinum toxin to confirm the trigger sites; controls received saline injections. Treated individuals underwent surgical deactivation of trigger site(s). Eighty-nine of 100 participants in the treatment group underwent surgery, and 79 were followed for five years. Ten individuals underwent deactivation of additional (different) trigger sites during the follow-up period and were not included in the data analysis. The final outcome with or without inclusion of these 10 individuals was not statistically different. Sixty-one (88 percent) of 69 participants experienced a positive response to the surgery after five years. Twenty (29 percent) reported complete elimination of migraine headache, 41 (59 percent) noticed a significant decrease, and eight (12 percent) experienced no significant change. When compared with the baseline values, all measured variables at 60 months improved significantly. Based on the five-year follow-up data, the authors concluded that there is strong evidence that surgical manipulation of one or more migraine trigger sites can successfully eliminate or reduce the frequency, duration, and intensity of migraine headache in a lasting manner. This study is of limited significance because no statistical comparisons were made at the five-year follow-up and patient-reported data may have introduced recall bias.

## Radiofrequency Ablation

The available evidence from published studies is not sufficient to conclude that RFA or denervation is an effective treatment for ON or headaches. Well-designed studies are needed to evaluate the potential advantages of RFA for these conditions and to identify which patients would benefit from this procedure.

In 2022, Suer and colleagues conducted a systematic review evaluating RCTs of cervical facet joint pain and cervicogenic headaches to establish the current level of evidence for treating the etiologies of pain with RFA. The primary outcome measured was pain relief and duration of pain relief, with the secondary outcomes measured being function, sleep, mood, return to work, additional treatments, and complications. The exploration uncovered four RCTs with a low ROB. The primary outcome measure of pain relief and duration of relief demonstrating a successful relief ranging from 30% to 50%. Secondary outcomes such as function and psychological distress were variable for treatment relief, and no significant difference was noted between groups in two of the studies included. The authors concluded the efficacy of cervical facet RFA for treating chronic neck pain. The evaluation is limited due to variability in the population and heterogeneous treatment outcomes with follow-up intervals that do not allow for meta-analyses. Questions remain, and further research is warranted on this treatment.

A systematic review by Orhurhu et al. (2021) was performed to summarize available evidence behind RFA for headaches, including pain outcome measures, secondary outcomes, and complications. A total of 18 studies composed of six RCTs, six prospective studies, and six retrospective studies were included in the review. All the studies assessed pain improvement with RFA for individuals with headaches. Most studies targeted the occipital nerve for treatment. Complications were mostly mild and self-limiting, including eyelid swelling, rash, superficial infection of the procedural site, and worsening of headache. The review discussed multiple studies that suggest the efficacy of RFA in the treatment of headaches. Outcomes varied based on the difference in approaches regarding continuous radiofrequency versus pulsed radiofrequency, temperature, and duration of administration. Most studies discussed in the review indicate a therapeutic benefit of RFA for headaches over a short-term period. The authors concluded that pain outcomes beyond one year are under-studied and further studies are needed to determine the long-term effects of RFA for headaches. Limitations included a large variability in definitions of trigeminal neuralgia, radiofrequency technique, and patient selection bias. There is a paucity of strong longitudinal RCTs and prospective studies.

A retrospective review by Guo et al. (2021) was performed to evaluate the effect of low-temperature plasma radiofrequency ablation (LTPRA) of the sphenopalatine ganglion (SPG) in treating chronic and episodic cluster headache. A total of 76 patients treated using LTPRA between January 2015 and October 2017 were reviewed. Fifty individuals suffered from episodic CH and the remaining 26 from chronic cluster headache. The primary outcomes were clinical improvement rate, defined as the percentage of partial and complete pain relief results at one day, 12 months, and 24 months of follow-up after the operation. Clinical improvement rates were 92.3%, 92.3%, and 73.1% in chronic cluster headache and 73.1%, 84% and 68% in episodic CH at each follow-up time point, respectively. Three individuals with chronic cluster headache and seven individuals with episodic CH showed no pain relief after the operation. Drooping eyelids were found in two cases, one recovered at the three-month follow-up but another one did not in the 24-month follow-up. No serious complications occurred intraoperatively or postoperatively. The authors concluded that LTPRA can be considered an effective and alternative surgical modality in treating patients with chronic and episodic CH based on SPG block. Further research with RCTs is needed to validate these findings.

Robinson et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review to summarize the current state of surgical ON management. Twenty-two studies met the inclusion criteria with a total of 766 individuals. Fifteen studies evaluated interventions on the GON and/or LON and seven studies evaluated interventions on the C2 nerve root. Interventions included decompression, ablation (radiofrequency and cryoablation), and stimulation. The studies used patient-reported pain scores as an outcome metric. Other outcome metrics included complication rates, patient satisfaction, quality of life, and analgesic usage. The average duration of follow-up ranged from 3 to 67 months. The authors found that GON decompression decreased mean ON pain intensity from  $7.18 \pm 1.33$  to  $1.73 \pm 1.95$ . Studies that addressed ablation, including RFA and cryoablation found an overall success rate of 85%, with an average VAS score decreased from  $7.4 \pm 1.7$  to  $2.9 \pm 1.7$ . The authors found that C2 ganglion decompression led to therapeutic success, as defined by > 50% reduction in patient-reported preoperative pain without analgesia use in 70% of individuals at 2.5-year follow-up. Cervical dorsal rhizotomy provided full pain relief in 64% of individuals, partial relief in 20%, and no relief in 16% at the five-year follow-up. The authors concluded that ON treatment identified peripheral nerve decompression, ablation, and stimulation as useful therapeutic options for medically refractory occipital pain. This study is limited by the low level of evidence and significant ROB of most of the articles. (Authors Acar et al. [2008], Blake et al. [2019], Choi et al. [2015], Ducic et al. [2014], Gande et al. [2016], Jose et al. [2018], Keifer et al. [2017], Li et al. [2012], and Pisapia et al. [2012], which were previously cited in this policy, are included in this study).

Lee et al. (2020) performed a retrospective chart review to evaluate the efficacy and complications of C2 dorsal root ganglion (DRG) pulsed RFA for cervicogenic headache and to identify factors related to the outcome of the procedure. Electronic medical records of consecutive patients who underwent C2 DRG block for cervicogenic headache from January 2012 to May 2018 at a pain center were reviewed. Consequent C2 DRG pulsed RFA was performed for individuals whose headache recurred after an initial period of relief 24 hours after the C2 DRG block. A *successful outcome* was defined as at least 50% pain relief at six months after C2 DRG pulsed RFA. Fluoroscopy-guided C2 DRG block was performed in 114 patients. Forty-five participants received C2 DRG pulsed RFA and 40.0% among them (18/45, success group) had  $\geq 50\%$  pain relief after six months. There were no post-procedure complications throughout the study period. More patients in the success group than in the failure group had a definite positive response ( $\geq 50\%$  pain relief) to a previous C2 DRG block ( $p < .001$ ). The authors concluded that C2 DRG pulsed RFA may be an effective treatment for individuals with cervicogenic headache, particularly for those who have previously experienced definite pain reduction after C2 DRG block. The limitations of the study design and small number of patients preclude firm conclusions.

Grandhi et al. (2018) performed a systematic review to examine the use of RFA and pulse radiofrequency for the management of cervicogenic headache. A review of the literature was conducted, and 10 studies met inclusion for review. The authors concluded that RFA and pulse RFA provided very limited benefit in the management of cervicogenic headache and there needs to be high-quality RCTs and/or strong non-RCTs to support the use of these techniques, despite numerous case reports demonstrating benefit.

Luo et al. (2018) prospectively investigated the long-term effects of ultrasound-guided percutaneous pulsed radiofrequency in the treatment of 22 refractory idiopathic supraorbital neuralgia patients. A reduction in the verbal pain numeric rating scale score of more than 50% was used as the standard of effectiveness. The effectiveness rates at different time points within two years were calculated. After a single pulsed radiofrequency treatment (PRFT), the effectiveness rate at one and three months was 77%, and the rates at six months, one year, and two years were 73%, 6%, and 50%, respectively. Twenty-three percent of individuals experienced mild upper eyelid ecchymosis that gradually disappeared after approximately two weeks. The authors concluded that the study demonstrated percutaneous pulsed radiofrequency may be a safe and effective treatment choice for individuals with refractory idiopathic supraorbital neuralgia. The findings of this study need to be validated by well-designed studies.

Fang et al. (2016) conducted a study to evaluate the efficacy and safety of a non-ablative computerized tomography-guided PRFT of sphenopalatine ganglion in patients with refractory cluster headaches. Sixteen consecutive cluster headache patients who failed to respond to conservative therapy treated with PRFT of sphenopalatine ganglion were analyzed. Eleven of 13 individuals with episodic cluster headaches (ECH) (85%) and one of three individuals with chronic cluster headaches (33%) were completely relieved of the headache. Two ECH patients and two individuals with chronic cluster headache showed no pain relief following the treatment. The mean time following PRFT for partial pain relief was 1.3 days (ranging from 1 to 3 days) and the mean time following PRFT for complete pain relief was 6.3 days (ranging from 1 to 20 days). All patients enrolled in this study showed no treatment-related side effects or complications. The authors concluded that patients with refractory ECH were quickly, effectively, and safely relieved from the cluster period after computerized tomography-guided PRFT of sphenopalatine ganglion, suggesting that it may be a therapeutic option if conservative treatments fail. Large sample sizes and long-term follow-up research will be useful to evaluate the efficacy of PRFT for individuals with chronic cluster headache.

Nagar et al. (2015) conducted a systematic review to investigate the clinical utility of radiofrequency neurotomy and pulsed RFA for the management of cervicogenic headache. The review included relevant literature identified through searches of PubMed, Cochrane, Clinical trials, U.S. National Guideline Clearinghouse and EMBASE from 1960 to January 2014. The focus was on randomized trials and case-control, prospective, cohort, and cross-sectional studies with participants suffering from cervicogenic headache who had failed conservative management. A study was judged to be positive if the interventions provided headache relief and improved quality of life. There were five non-randomized trials among them 4/5 were of moderate quality, 3/5 showed RF ablation and 1/5 showed PRF as an effective intervention for cervicogenic headache. There were four randomized trials among them 2/4 were of high quality, 3/4 investigated RF ablation as an intervention for cervicogenic headache, and 1/4 investigated pulsed RFA as an intervention for cervicogenic headache. None of the randomized studies showed strong evidence for radiofrequency and pulsed RFA as an effective intervention for cervicogenic headache. There were two RCTs which did not show significant benefits with RFA. There is limited evidence for radiofrequency and pulsed RFA therapies for management of cervicogenic headache. Evidence is insufficient to assess the effects on the health outcomes because of the limited number of studies or the low power of the studies, unexplained inconsistency between RCTs, flaws in trial design, gaps in the chain of evidence, and lack of detailed information on desired health outcomes.

Manolitsis and Elahi (2014) conducted an evidence-based review of the current literature concerning the use of pulsed radiofrequency for ON. The authors found that a total of three clinical studies and one case report investigating the use of pulsed radiofrequency for ON have been published worldwide. Statistically significant improvements in pain, quality of life, and adjuvant pain medication usage have been demonstrated. According to the authors, the evidence limitations include lack of randomized control trials, small study sample sizes, an absence of diagnostic block imaging guidance, and the use of outcome measures that are inherently subjective, limiting objectivity and introducing an unquantifiable degree of bias. The authors concluded that clinical studies to date examining the efficacy of pulsed radiofrequency as a treatment for ON have yielded promising results, demonstrating sustained improvement in pain, quality of life, and adjuvant pain medication usage. The authors stated that despite these encouraging clinical studies, conclusive evidence in support of PRF as an interventional treatment option for ON awaits to be seen.

Ducic et al. (2013) systematically compared the outcomes of different types of interventional procedures offered for the treatment of headaches and targeted toward peripheral nerves based on available published literature. The objective of this study was to systematically review the literature to compare the published outcomes and effectiveness of peripheral nerve surgery, radiofrequency (RF) therapy, and peripheral nerve stimulators for chronic headaches, migraines. A total of 26 studies met the inclusion criteria. Of these, 14 articles studied nerve decompression, 9 studied peripheral nerve stimulation, and 3 studied radiofrequency (RF) intervention. When study populations and results were pooled, a total of 1253 individuals had undergone nerve decompression with an 86% success rate, 184 individuals were treated by nerve stimulation with a 68% success rate, and 131 individuals were treated by RF with a 55% success rate. The authors concluded that although peripheral nerve surgery seems to be the interventional treatment modality that is currently best supported by the literature, better controlled and normalized high-quality studies will help to better define the specific roles for each type of intervention.

## Neurostimulation or Electrical Stimulation for Headaches/Occipital Neuralgia

The available studies were limited and had significant methodological flaws, making it difficult to draw conclusions regarding the efficacy of electrical stimulation for the treatment of headaches or ON. No well-designed RCTs in the medical literature compare neurostimulation to established treatment options or a sham procedure. Studies on larger populations with longer follow-up are needed to establish the benefits of neurostimulation and electrical stimulation for treating these conditions.

In a 2023 prospective, double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled, multicenter clinical trial, Tepper and colleagues enrolled 248 participants to assess the clinical efficacy of remote electrical neuromodulation (REN) for preventing migraine. Participants were randomized to a 1:1 ratio and observed for four weeks with an eight-week double-blind intervention in which participants utilized either REN or placebo stimulation (128 actives, 120 placebos). To assess results, participants recorded their symptoms daily through an electronic diary. The modified intention-to-treat analysis consisted of 95 active and 84 placebo participants who qualified. The primary endpoint was measured from the mean number of migraine days per month from baseline, and the results showed a mean reduction of  $4.0 \pm \text{SD of } 4.0$  days ( $1.3 \pm 4.0$  in placebo, therapeutic gain =  $2.7$  [CI-3.9 to -1.5],  $p < 0.001$ ). The significance was maintained when analyzing the episodic ( $-3.2 \pm 3.4$  vs.  $-1.0 \pm 3.6$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ) and chronic ( $-4.7 \pm 4.4$  vs.  $-1.6 \pm 4.4$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) migraine subgroups separately. REN was also superior to placebo in reduction of moderate/severe headache days ( $3.8 \pm 3.9$  vs.  $2.2 \pm 3.6$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), reduction of headache days of all severities ( $4.5 \pm 4.1$  vs.  $1.8 \pm 4.6$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), percentage of patients achieving 50% reduction in moderate/severe headache days (51.6% [49/95] vs. 35.7% [30/84],  $p = 0.033$ ), and reduction in days of acute medication intake ( $3.5 \pm 4.1$  vs.  $> < 0.001$ ). The significance was maintained when analyzing the episodic ( $-3.2 \pm 3.4$  vs.  $-1.0 \pm 3.6$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ) and chronic ( $-4.7 \pm 4.4$  vs.  $-1.6 \pm 4.4$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) migraine subgroups separately. REN was also superior to placebo in reduction of moderate/severe headache days ( $3.8 \pm 3.9$  vs.  $2.2 \pm 3.6$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), reduction of headache days of all severities ( $4.5 \pm 4.1$  vs.  $1.8 \pm 4.6$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), percentage of patients achieving 50% reduction in moderate/severe headache days (51.6% [49/95] vs. 35.7% [30/84],  $p = 0.033$ ), and reduction in days of acute medication intake ( $3.5 \pm 4.1$  vs.  $1.4 \pm 4.3$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Comparable results were obtained in the ITT analysis. No serious device-related adverse events were reported in any group. The authors concluded that these results show that REN is a safe and effective preventive treatment for migraine, offering a much-needed non-pharmacological alternative as a stand-alone preventive therapy or combined with pharmacological therapies to enhance preventive impact further. The trial's limitations consist of a small sample size of participants who took additional preventative medications and those who did not; also, the definition of a migraine day included a possible combination of headache and aura, which does not comply with the IHS guidelines. Lastly, the inclusion criteria allowed for a single preventative agent, which limits the generalizability of the results in participants taking two or more preventatives (Included in the 2023 Hayes evolving evidence review).

In a 2022 randomized, sham-controlled, double-blind, multicenter trial, Tepper and colleagues evaluated the efficacy and safety of concurrent non-invasive stimulation of occipital and trigeminal nerves for the acute treatment of migraine with or without

aura. The intention-to-treat group consisted of 131 participants, with 67 in the active group and 64 in the sham. One hundred nine participants were treated for at least one migraine episode, with 50 in the active group and 59 in the sham. The primary endpoint measured was the decrease of pain two hours subsequent treatment initiation. The secondary endpoints were pain relief at one hour and freedom from the most bothersome symptom at 2 hours post-treatment initiation. Exploratory endpoints consisted of freedom from the most painful symptom at two hours and sustained pain freedom 24 hours following treatment. Sixty percent of contributors (30/50) in the active arm described pain relief at two hours after the start of the first eligible treatment (primary outcome) versus 37% (22/59) in the control arm (difference, 23%; 95% CI, 2%-41%;  $p = 0.018$ ). Pain freedom at two hours without rescue medicine was described by 46% (23/50) of contributors in the active arm and by 12% (7/59) of individuals in the sham arm ( $p < 0.001$ ). Pain freedom two hours after the treatment and after 24 hours was described by 4.25 times more participants in the active arm (36%; 18/50) compared to the sham arm (8%; 5/59). The 28% difference was statistically significant (95% CI, 1%-43%;  $p < 0.001$ ). A 4.25-fold difference was also seen associating the proportion of individuals free from pain and most bothersome symptom two h after the stimulation (47% [17/36] and 11% [5/45] in the active and sham arms, correspondingly; 95% CI, 14%-54%;  $p < 0.001$ ).

A single-center, prospective, long-term open-label study was performed by Al-Kaisy et al. (2022) to evaluate the efficacy and safety of paresthesia-free high cervical 10 kHz spinal cord stimulation (SCS) in the treatment of rCM. Twenty adults with rCM (mean numbers of preventive treatments failed:  $12.2 \pm 3.1$ ) were enrolled and implanted with a 10 kHz SCS system (Senza™ system, Nevro Corp), with the distal tip of the lead(s) positioned epidurally at the C2 vertebral level. Safety and effectiveness outcomes including adverse events, headache and migraine reductions, responder rates (RR), Migraine Disability Assessment (MIDAS), Headache Impact Test-6 (HIT-6), and Migraine-Specific Quality-of-Life (MSQ), were captured up to 52 weeks after implantation. Compared to baseline, at 52 weeks post-implantation, there was a reduction of mean monthly migraine days (MMD) by 9.3 days ( $p < 0.001$ ). Sixty percent and 50% of individuals obtained respectively at least 30% and at least 50% reduction in mean MMD. By week 52, 50% of patients' chronic pattern converted to an episodic pattern. The proportion of subjects classified with severe headache-related disability on the HIT-6, decreased from 100% to 60% at week 52. Meaningful improvements of headache-related quality of life measured by the MSQ scale were observed with mean gain of  $24.9 \pm 23.1$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) points at 52 weeks. No unanticipated adverse device effects occurred. No patients required any additional device surgical revision. The authors concluded that 10 kHz SCS may be a safe and effective neurostimulation option for individuals with rCM stating that the paresthesia-free waveform constitutes an advantage for future methodologically sound sham-controlled studies in headache neuromodulation. A small sample size makes it difficult to decide whether these conclusions can be generalized to a larger population. Further research with RCTs is needed to validate these findings.

In 2021, Hayes conducted an Evolving Evidence Review on the Nerivio device (Theranica Bio-Electronics Ltd.) for the Treatment of Acute Migraine Episodes. At that time, the exploration of clinical studies and systematic reviews uncovered minimal support for using Nerivio for managing acute migraine episodes. After reviewing clinical practice guidelines and position statements, the review concluded there needed to be more guidance for using Nerivio to manage acute migraine episodes. The review suggests evidence comparing Nerivio with standard migraine care is needed to inform its real-world value as a treatment possibility. The review was updated in 2023, with the same conclusions for systematic reviews (minimal support) and weak support from clinical practice guidelines and position statements. Evaluation of the literature indicated that new evidence for the safety and efficacy has become available since the 2021 publication, which offers a possible upgrade in the current level of support from clinical studies to 'minimal support.' Overall, there was no new evidence with longer-term follow-up, or evidence comparing Nerivio with standard migraine care since the 2021 publication, leaving the conclusion of continued minimal support for the technology.

Joswig et al. (2021) performed a retrospective review of 96 patients with migraine, cervicogenic headache, cluster headache, neuropathic pain of the scalp, tension-type headache, and new daily persistent headache who had undergone ONS (61.5%), supraorbital nerve stimulation (SONS) (11.5%), or combined ONS plus SONS (27.1%) trial implantation and definitive implantation from 2007 to 2017. Changes in pain perception over time were monitored using the VAS for pain. The cohort consisted of 60.4% women and 39.6% men, with a mean age of  $46.9 \pm 11.5$  years and pain duration of  $14 \pm 14.1$  years. Of the 96 participants, 65 (67.7%) were treatment responders to a trial ( $\geq 30\%$  amelioration in the average or maximum VAS score for pain and/or number of headache days) that had lasted  $22.5 \pm 8.8$  days. The reduction in their average VAS score for pain was to  $37\% \pm 24.4\%$  of baseline compared with  $99.1\% \pm 24.1\%$  of baseline for those without a response ( $p < 0.01$ ). Of the 56 patients who had undergone implantation and had long-term follow-up data available for  $\leq 10$  years, 32 (57.1%) reported a  $\geq 50\%$  reduction in their average VAS score for pain. Four individuals (6.5%) had requested hardware explanation. Stage II complications included one infection (1.6%) and six electrode dislocations (9.7%). The authors concluded that following careful patient selection, according to a positive response to a trial of ONS and/or SONS, clinically meaningful long-term benefit was achieved in 57.1%



of those with various chronic headache conditions. Study limitations included the retrospective nature, lack of controls receiving placebo intervention, and randomization.

Pohl et al. (2021) completed a RCT to test the hypothesis that self-administered anodal transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) over the visual cortex significantly decreases the number of MMD in episodic migraine. The study was single-blind, randomized, and sham-controlled. Inclusion criteria were individuals aged 18-80 years and diagnosis of episodic migraine. Exclusion criteria were pregnancy, a neurodegenerative disorder, a contraindication against MRI examinations, and less than two migraine days during the 28-day baseline period. Individuals whose baseline period suggested chronic migraine were excluded. After baseline, participants applied daily either verum (anodal-1 mA to 20 min) or sham tDCS (anodal-1 mA to 30 sec) at Oz (reference Cz electrode) for 28 days. Headache diaries were used to record the number of migraine days at baseline, during the stimulation period, and during four subsequent 28-day periods. Twenty-eight patients were included; two were excluded after the baseline period because less than two migraine days occurred; three were excluded because their headache diaries suggested the diagnosis of chronic migraine. Twenty-three datasets were taken for further analysis. Compared to sham tDCS (n = 12), verum tDCS (n = 11) resulted in a lower number of migraine days (p = 0.010) across all follow-up periods. There was no change in total headache days (p = 0.165), anxiety (p = 0.884), or depression scores (p = 0.535). No serious adverse events occurred; minor side effects were similar in both groups. The authors concluded that this study provides Class II evidence that self-administered anodal tDCS over the visual cortex in EM is safe, and results in a lower number of MMD. However, it has neither an immediate nor a long-term effect. Data suggest that tDCS has no effect on headaches other than migraine or on comorbid anxiety or depressive symptoms. Study limitations included the retrospective nature, lack of controls receiving placebo intervention, and the classification of individual attacks was based on the headache diary; non-migraine days were not classified. The findings of this study need to be validated by well-designed studies.

A systematic review of the efficacy and safety of peripheral nerve stimulation (PNS) in managing acute or chronic pain was conducted by Xu et al. (2021). The review included RCTs and observational studies (n = 5) with Level I and II evidence of PNS in chronic migraine headache and Level II evidence in cluster headaches. The authors concluded that PNS of the occipital nerves reduced pain and disability and should be considered as an option for migraine and cluster headache when other noninvasive measures fail. There was a lack of high-quality RCTs. Meta-analysis was not possible due to wide variations in experimental design and heterogeneity of the study population.

Göbel et al. (2021) completed a prospective, randomized, interventional study to evaluate the effect of ONS on pain-modulatory mechanisms in the trigeminocervical area for individuals with chronic migraine. In a balanced-repeated-measurements design in eight individuals with chronic migraine with and without active ONS, the authors analyzed which effects ONS had on the orbicularis oculi reflex dynamically elicited by corneal air flow. To stimulate the reflex response, instead of an artificial electrical stimulus, a standardized airflow is directed onto the cornea of the eye. The reflex response is recorded using a video camera detecting eyelid closure frequency (documented as eyelid closures per minute). This method aims to measure the anti-nociceptive protective mechanism of the orbicularis oculi reflex in a way as physiological as possible. At the same time, it allows recording the reflex response dynamically averaged over a longer period. The study was divided into two parts, the ON phase with active ONS, and the OFF phase with inactive ONS. In the former, the orbicularis oculi reflex was recorded quantitatively with active ONS. The OFF phase included the measurement of the orbicularis oculi reflex with ONS deactivated. There was a one-h break between the two test runs. To rule out a sequence effect, the individuals were randomized into two groups: One group (A) first went through the ON-phase measurement and, after an hour's break, the OFF-phase measurement. In the second group (B), the OFF-phase measurement was started, and the ON-phase measurement was carried out 1 h later. Results showed the orbicularis oculi reflex in active ONS (7.38 ±20.14 eyelid closures/minute) compared to inactive ONS (18.73 ±14.30 eyelid closures/minute) to be reduced (p = 0.021). The authors concluded that this suggests ONS can directly counteract the trigeminally mediated central sensitization in chronic migraine and protectively reduce the effects of aversive peripheral stimulation. A small sample size makes it difficult to decide whether these conclusions can be generalized to a larger population. Further research with RCTs are needed to validate these findings.

A 2020 ECRI Clinical Evidence Assessment on Nerivio Migra reviewed clinical evidence from two sham controlled RCT, two nonrandomized comparison studies, and one large multicenter case series that addressed migraine pain, symptom relief, and adverse events. There was a total of 1,722 participants. Two RCTs reported more individuals experienced pain relief with Nerivio (64% and 66.7%, respectively) than a sham treatment (26% and 38.8%). One study reported that 89.7% of participants avoided medication during attacks. The authors concluded that additional RCTs are needed to characterize Nerivio's effectiveness as an alternative or adjunct to conventional treatments. Limitations included ROB from small sample size and lack of a control group. The updated 2022 ECRI Clinical Evidence Assessment states that consistent evidence shows Nerivio can

decrease acute pain and medication use at 2 to 24-hour follow-up in 50% of individuals experiencing episodic, chronic, and/or menstrual migraine. The assessment notes that the technology is safe, with few mild adverse events reported. However, the studies reviewed are small, and confirmatory RCTs with long-term follow-up are necessary to determine safety and efficacy in the long term.

A Hayes Health Technology Assessment report on ONS for chronic migraine headache identified eight studies which included, four RCTs, of which two were crossover design; one was an uncontrolled, open-label extension study of an RCT; and four were prospective, uncontrolled studies. Sample size ranged from eight to 157 individuals and follow-up ranged from three months to nine years. In all but one study, individuals were selected for permanent ONS implantation based on a positive response to a temporary trial of ONS, typically, a  $\geq 50\%$  reduction in pain that lasted for a few weeks. The most reported outcome measures were the reduction in headache frequency and headache pain intensity. Other commonly reported outcome measures were response rate (most often defined as  $\geq 50\%$  reduction in headache frequency and/or intensity) and/or a  $\geq 30\%$  reduction, headache-related disability, and quality of life. The report concluded that based on the available evidence, ONS appeared to have a positive but variable treatment effect on headache outcomes in selected patients, particularly in reductions of frequency and intensity. There was a risk of complications that may require additional surgery. This conclusion was based on an overall low-quality body of evidence, inconsistent study designs and lack of a defined population. One newly published study was uncovered in the 2022 Health Technology annual review. Hayes did not change their current rating, which reflects low-quality evidence of a potential benefit of ONS for improving headache outcomes in some individuals with chronic migraine. The update outlines how ONS is usually well tolerated; it may result in complications requiring additional surgeries (Hayes, 2020a; updated 2022). (Authors Dodick et al. [2014] and Rodrigo et al. [2017] which were previously cited in this policy, are included in this study).

A Hayes Health Technology Assessment report focused on ONS for the treatment of chronic cluster headache that had failed to respond to available drug treatments. The evidence base for this report included one retrospective comparative cohort study, four prospective or retrospective pretest/posttest studies, and two prospective case series that evaluated ONS for treatment of individuals with chronic cluster headache ( $n = 15-67$  individuals followed for three months to 6.1 years). The reviewed studies did not provide sufficient evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of ONS for chronic cluster headache. Across the studies that evaluated ONS for treatment of chronic cluster headache, individuals achieved a clinically meaningful  $\geq 50\%$  decrease in cluster headache attacks from baseline in 41% to 90% of those treated. Reduction in intensity of pain during a cluster headache attack from baseline varied widely (range, 11%-96%) across studies, although one study found a 2.3% increase in pain intensity that was not statistically significant. The study found that deep brain stimulation (DBS) was more effective than ONS with a greater number of individuals achieving a  $\geq 50\%$  decrease in cluster headache attacks from baseline in the DBS group than in the ONS group (100% versus 41%). Reduction in pain intensity scores was greater for the patients receiving DBS than patients receiving ONS (50% versus 11% reduction). Complications of ONS included uncomfortable or intolerable paresthesia (13%-35%), infection (2%-27%), pain or discomfort at wound or implant site (3%-24%), hardware or stimulation dysfunction (19%), wire or electrode breakage or migration (2%-17%), neck stiffness (16%), battery replacement needed  $< 1$  year after implantation (12%), wire externalization or pressure ulcer due to wire or electrode (4%-9%), allergy to surgical material (4%), and wound issues (2%-4%). For infections and certain other complications, up to 27% of stimulators needed to be surgically removed or replaced. The body of evidence concerning ONS for chronic cluster headache was small in size and very low in quality. One of the reviewed studies was a comparative cohort study that was rated as poor quality. The other 6 studies were case series that were rated as poor or very poor. Larger, well-designed studies are needed to determine whether ONS is an effective treatment for refractory, chronic cluster headache. In the updated 2022 Health Technology annual review, new evidence was uncovered; however, there was no new evidence with longer-term follow-up and no new technology applications. Hayes maintained their rating, which reflects very low-quality evidence that ONS provides some benefits for individuals with refractory symptoms due to chronic cluster headaches. Substantial uncertainty remains, with no concrete conclusions drawn due to the lack of controlled studies of ONS for cluster headaches and the small size of the controlled studies. The review shows that while ONS is generally safe, there is a risk of complications or need to remove the device over time. (Hayes, 2020b; updated 2022). (Authors Magis et al. [2011] and Miller et al. [2017] which were previously cited in this policy, are included in this study).

Moisset et al. (2020) performed a systematic review and meta-analysis of RCTs focusing on migraine treatment using neurostimulation methods. Outcomes for the quantitative synthesis were two-hour pain-free for acute treatment and headache days per month for preventive treatment. Thirty-eight studies were included in the analysis (7 acute, 31 preventive). The authors concluded that REN seemed effective for acute treatment. Invasive ONS was effective for chronic migraine prevention. Supra-orbital transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), percutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (PENS), and high-

frequency repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS) over the motor cortex (M1) were effective for migraine prevention. The quality of the evidence was very poor. Future large and well-conducted studies are needed to confirm efficacy.

Aibar-Durán et al. (2020) describe two prospective cohorts of individuals with refractory cluster headache treated with ONS and DBS and compare preoperative to postoperative status at six and 12 months after the surgery and at final follow-up. Efficacy analysis using objective and subjective variables is reported, as well as medication reduction and complications. The ONS group consisted of 13 men and four women. The median number of attacks per week (Naw) before surgery was 28, and the median follow-up duration was 48 months. The DBS group comprised five men and two women. The median Naw before surgery was 56, and the median follow-up was 36 months. The Naw and VAS scores were significantly reduced for the ONS and DBS groups after surgery. However, while all the patients from the DBS group were considered responders at final follow-up, with more than 85% being satisfied with the treatment, approximately 29% of initial responders to ONS became resistant by the final follow-up ( $p = 0.0253$ ). The authors concluded that ONS is initially effective as a treatment for refractory cluster headache, although a trend toward loss of efficacy was observed. No clear predictors of good clinical response were found in the present study. Conversely, DBS appears effective and provides a more stable clinical response over time with an acceptable rate of surgical complications.

Halker et al. (2020) performed a systematic review to evaluate the effectiveness and comparative effectiveness of pharmacologic and nonpharmacologic therapies for the acute treatment of EM in adults. Seventeen RCTs and one comparative observational study with 1,758 participants were included for nonpharmacologic therapies. The authors concluded that compared with placebo, several nonpharmacologic treatments may improve various measures of pain, including REN (moderate strength of evidence [SOE]), magnetic stimulation (low SOE), acupuncture (low SOE), chamomile oil (low SOE), external trigeminal nerve stimulation (low SOE), and eye movement desensitization re-processing (low SOE). These interventions, including the noninvasive neuromodulation devices, have been evaluated only by single or very few trials.

A randomized, sham-controlled, parallel-group, double-blind safety and efficacy study at 21 headache centers in the USA was conducted by Goadsby et al. (2019). Eligible participants were 22 years or older and had chronic cluster headaches (at least four attacks per week) that were either previously or currently inadequately controlled with available therapies. Participants were randomly assigned (1:1) to receive either sphenopalatine ganglion stimulation ( $n = 45$ ) or sham stimulation ( $n = 48$ ). Thirty-six individuals in the sphenopalatine ganglion stimulation group and 40 in the control group had at least one attack during the experimental phase and were included in efficacy analyses. The proportion of attacks for which pain relief was experienced at 15 minutes was 62.46% (95% CI 49.15-74.12) in the sphenopalatine ganglion stimulation group versus 38.87% (28.60-50.25) in the control group (odds ratio 2.62 [95% CI 1.28-5.34];  $p = 0.008$ ). Nine serious adverse events were reported. Three of these serious adverse events were related to the implantation procedure (aspiration during intubation, nausea and vomiting, and venous injury or compromise). A fourth serious adverse event was an infection that was attributed to both the stimulation device and the implantation procedure. The other five serious adverse events were unrelated. The authors concluded that sphenopalatine ganglion stimulation seems efficacious and is well tolerated, and potentially offers an alternative approach to the treatment of chronic cluster headache. Further research is needed to clarify its place in clinical practice.

A monocenter, prospective, open-label, pilot trial (Birlea et al., 2019) explored the therapeutic utility and safety of external trigeminal neurostimulation (eTNS) as a preventive treatment in patients suffering from chronic migraine. Participants were adult patients with a history of chronic migraine meeting International Classification of Headache Disorder-3 beta (2013) diagnostic criteria with or without medication overuse. After a one-month baseline period, 58 patients applied at least one daily 20-min session of eTNS for three months. Primary outcomes were mean monthly changes in frequency of headache days and in overall acute headache medication intake. Compared to baseline, frequency of headache days decreased by 3.12 days (16.21%,  $p < 0.001$ ) and acute medication intake decreased from 26.33 to 18.22 (30.81%,  $p < 0.001$ ) during the third month of treatment. Twenty-six patients reported 47 minor adverse events, of which only two were related to the use of the device (skin irritation under the electrode and headache worsening with vertigo). The authors concluded that this open-label pilot trial suggests that eTNS with the Cefaly® device is safe and effective as prophylactic treatment for chronic migraine in adult patients. The treatment effect is greatest in patients with noncontinuous headache; it is hardly significant in those with continuous headache. The study's open-label design and the lack of placebo arm are a limitation. The fact that the number of daily eTNS sessions was not the same for all individuals could be considered another weakness of the trial protocol, producing unnecessary variability.

A 2019 ECRI Health Technology Assessment on ONS for treating medically refractory chronic cluster headache found that evidence from six small case series at high ROB is insufficient to determine how well ONS works or how it compares with other

electrical stimulation options for individuals with chronic cluster headache that has not responded well to medical therapy. Side effects from ONS are common and include lead migration and local inflammation. Although studies reported reductions in headache frequency in more than half of patients, results need validation from RCTs.

Tao et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis to analyze TENS effectiveness and safety for individuals with migraines. The study included four RCTs, which compared the effect of TENS (n = 161) with sham TENS (n = 115). Change in the number of monthly headache days (MHD), RR, painkiller intake, adverse events and satisfaction were extracted as outcome. The authors concluded that there is low-quality evidence suggesting that TENS may be effective in increasing RR, reducing headache days and painkiller intake, serving as a well-tolerated alternative for migraineurs. Future well-designed RCTs with extensive follow-up are needed.

A randomized blind control study aimed to assess the effectiveness and safety of PENS in migraine treatment was conducted by Li and Xu (2017). Sixty-two individuals with at least two migration attacks each month were recruited and randomly divided into a PENS group and a sham PENS group in a ratio of 1:1. All participants received PENS or sham PENS 30 minutes daily, five times weekly for 12 weeks. All outcome measurements were performed at treatment initiation to establish a baseline and after 12 weeks of treatment. The authors report that at the end of the 12 weeks, the group receiving PENS exhibited statistically significant decrease in the mean in MMD compared with the group receiving sham PENS intervention. The 50% RR was significantly higher in the PENS group than that in the sham PENS group. The monthly migraine attacks (MMA), MHD, and monthly acute antimigraine drug intake (MAADI) were also significantly lower in the PENS group than those in the sham PENS group. The authors concluded that the results of the study demonstrated that PENS is more effective and safer than Sham PENS for the treatment of migraine. Follow-up regarding both short and long-term effectiveness of PENS for treatment of migraine still needs to be assessed.

Liu et al. (2017) performed a randomized, controlled trial of transcutaneous occipital nerve stimulation (tONS) for prevention of migraine to evaluate the efficacy and tolerability of tONS for individuals with migraine. Participants (n = 110) were randomized to one of five therapeutic groups before treatment for one month. Groups A through C received tONS at different frequencies, group D underwent sham tONS intervention, and group E received topiramate orally. The authors report that the 50% RR was significantly greater in the groups undergoing active tONS and topiramate, compared with sham-treated group. A significant reduction in headache intensity was noted in each test group compared with the sham group. They concluded that tONS therapy is a new promising approach for migraine prevention. It has infrequent and mild adverse events and may be effective among those who prefer nonpharmacological treatment. The findings of this study need to be validated by well-designed studies with long-term follow-up.

Mekhail et al. (2016) presented 52-week safety and efficacy results from an open-label extension of a randomized, sham-controlled trial for individuals with chronic migraine undergoing PNS of the occipital nerves. In this single-center, 20 participants were implanted with a neurostimulation system, randomized to an active or control group for 12 weeks, and received open-label treatment for an additional 40 weeks. Outcomes collected included number of headache days, pain intensity, Migraine Disability Assessment (MIDAS), Zung Pain and Distress (PAD), direct reports of headache pain relief, quality of life, satisfaction, and adverse events. Headache days per month were reduced by 8.51 ( $\pm$  9.81) days. The proportion of individuals who achieved a 30% and 50% reduction in headache days and/or pain intensity was 60% and 35%, respectively. MIDAS and Zung PAD were reduced for all patients. Fifteen (75%) of the 20 patients at the site reported at least one adverse event. A total of 20 adverse events was reported from the site. The authors concluded that their results supported the 12-month efficacy of 20 individuals with chronic migraine receiving PNS of the occipital nerves. The significance of this study is limited by small sample size and short follow-up period.

Chen et al. (2015) conducted a systematic review to examine the effectiveness and adverse effects of ONS for chronic migraine. Five RCTs (total n = 402) and seven case series (total n = 115) met the inclusion criteria. All three multicenter RCTs included an initial blinded phase of 12 weeks, during which participants received either active or sham stimulation. ONB and intraoperative testing were performed in the fourth center. The blinded phase was followed by an open-label phase of one–three years during which all participants received active stimulation (results not yet published). Baseline migraine days per month were similar across the studies (20 to 23). Participants in the trials had between 19–22 days with prolonged, moderate or severe headache per month at baseline. Those receiving sham stimulation had a reduction of 2–4 days per month at three months. Meta-analysis shows that ONS was associated with an additional mean reduction of 2.59 days per month compared with sham control. Serious adverse events occurred in between 1% to 6% of individuals in multicenter RCTs at 3 months and lead dislodgement and infections were common and often require revision surgery. Reported infection rates range from 4% to

30% with varied length of follow-up. The authors concluded that current evidence on the effectiveness and safety of ONS is still limited in quantity and remains inconclusive. Further measures to reduce the risk of adverse events and revision surgery are needed. The quantitative analysis was hampered by incomplete publication and reporting of trial data.

## **Clinical Practice Guidelines**

### ***American Academy of Pain Medicine (AAPM) Foundation***

The AAPM developed a multidisciplinary panel of eight physicians, two psychologists, and one patient representative to review the multidisciplinary preventative options for migraine management in three categories: medications, behavioral, and interventional strategies. The panel concluded there is low certainty of evidence that GONBs with local anesthetic are more effective than saline injections in reducing headache days or acute medication use per month. There is insufficient evidence that GONBs with local anesthetic are more effective than saline in reducing patient impairment, as defined by PROs. The adverse event profile is minimal. Overall, the committee gave GONBs a weak recommendation for the prevention of chronic migraine and found insufficient evidence of efficacy for episodic migraine. This treatment may be more effective for acute or short-term preventive therapy, and further research should be directed to those areas (Barad et al., 2022).

### ***American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA)***

In their practice statement on post-dural puncture headache management (PDPH), the ASA stated that there is insufficient evidence to recommend the use of GONBs or sphenopalatine ganglion blocks in the treatment of obstetric PDPH (ASA, 2021).

### ***American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA)/American Society of Regional Anesthesia and Pain Medicine (ASRA)***

In practice guidelines created jointly in 2010, the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) and American Society of Regional Anesthesia and Pain Medicine (ASRA) state the following: “Subcutaneous PNS may be used in the multimodal treatment of patients with painful peripheral nerve injuries who have not responded to other therapies” (ASA/ASRA, 2010).

### ***American Headache Society (AHS)***

A 2019 AHS position statement on integrating new migraine treatments into clinical practice states that neuromodulation and biobehavioral therapy may be appropriate for preventive and acute treatment, depending on the needs of individual patients. Neuromodulation may be helpful for individuals who prefer nondrug therapies, respond poorly, cannot tolerate, or have contraindications to pharmacotherapy (AHS, 2019).

A 2016 AHS guideline for treating cluster headaches recommends (Level A) sumatriptan subcutaneously, zolmitriptan nasal spray, and high-flow oxygen for acute treatment. Sphenopalatine ganglion stimulation has been administered as a Level B recommendation for acute treatment. Suboccipital steroid injections have emerged as the only treatment to receive a Level A recommendation. Other newly evaluated treatments have been given a Level B recommendation (negative study: DBS), a Level C recommendation (positive study: warfarin; negative studies: cimetidine/chlorpheniramine, candesartan), or a Level U (data inadequate or conflicting) recommendation (frovatriptan). Further studies are warranted to demonstrate the safety and efficacy of established and emerging therapies (Robbins et al., 2016).

To draw attention to tests and procedures associated with low-value care in headache medicine, the AHS joined the Choosing Wisely initiative of the American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation. One of the recommendations approved by the Choosing Wisely task force of the AHS was not to recommend surgical deactivation of migraine trigger points outside of a clinical trial (Loder et al., 2013).

AHS has issued a statement about the surgical intervention in migraine treatment that indicates that surgery for migraine is a last-resort option and is probably not appropriate for most sufferers. According to the AHS, there are no convincing or definitive data, to date, which show its long-term value. Besides replacing the use of more appropriate treatments, surgical intervention also may produce side effects that are not reversible and carry the risks associated with any surgery (AHS 2012)

### ***American Society of Interventional Pain Physicians (ASIPP)***

A 2013 ASIPP guideline recommends that “therapeutic neurotomy may be provided based on the response from controlled diagnostic blocks.”

## ***Congress of Neurological Surgeons***

The Congress of Neurological Surgeons published an evidence-based guideline in 2015 supporting the use of ONS as a treatment option for individuals with medical refractory ON. The population in the nine studies reviewed was small and there was a short duration of follow-up (Sweet, 2015). Class III evidence: Level III recommendation (Evidence from case series, comparative studies with historical controls, case reports, and expert opinion, as well as significantly flawed randomized, controlled trials).

## ***Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense (VA/DoD)***

A 2020 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the primary care management of headache found there is insufficient evidence to recommend for or against the following for headache:

- Transcranial magnetic stimulation
- Transcranial direct current stimulation
- Pulsed radiofrequency or sphenopalatine ganglion block
- External trigeminal nerve stimulation
- Supraorbital electrical stimulation
- Neuromodulation

## ***European Headache Federation***

In a set of recommendations regarding neuromodulation for chronic headaches, the European Headache Federation states that despite a growing field of stimulation devices in headaches treatment, further controlled studies are warranted to validate, strengthen and disseminate the use of neurostimulation. The European Headache Federation states that until these data are available, any neurostimulation device should only be used for individuals with medically intractable syndromes from tertiary headache centers either as part of a valid study or have shown to be effective in such controlled studies with an acceptable side effect profile (Martelletti et al., 2013).

## ***International Neuromodulation Society (INS)***

The INS board of directors chose an expert panel, the Neuromodulation Appropriateness Consensus Committee (NACC), to evaluate the peer-reviewed literature, current research, and clinical experience and to give guidance for the appropriate use of these methods. The NACC found that evidence supports extracranial stimulation for facial pain, migraine, and scalp pain but is limited for intracranial neuromodulation (Deer et al. 2014).

## ***National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN)***

The NCCN practice guidelines (2022) for adult cancer pain indicate that interventional therapies that can be useful in the relief of cancer pain include nerve blocks, vertebral augmentation, regional infusion of analgesics, neurostimulation and RF ablation. This recommendation is based on category 2A level of evidence (based upon lower-level evidence, there is uniform NCCN consensus that the intervention is appropriate).

## ***National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)***

A 2015 NICE guideline for the implantation of a sphenopalatine ganglion stimulation device for chronic cluster headache has the following states that current evidence on the efficacy of implantation of a sphenopalatine ganglion stimulation device for chronic cluster headache, in the short term (up to 2 months), is adequate. A variety of complications have been documented, most of which occur early and resolve; surgical revision of the implanted system is sometimes needed. The procedure should only be used with special arrangements for clinical governance, consent and audit or research. NICE encourages further research on sphenopalatine ganglion stimulation for chronic cluster headache.

NICE stated that the evidence on ONS for intractable chronic migraine shows some efficacy in the short term but there is very little evidence about long-term outcomes. With regard to safety, there is a risk of complications, needing further surgery. Therefore, NICE recommends that this procedure should only be used with special arrangements for clinical governance, consent, and audit or research. NICE encourages publication of further information from comparative studies and from collaborative data collection to guide future use of this procedure and to provide individuals with the best possible advice (NICE 2013).

# U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

This section is to be used for informational purposes only. FDA approval alone is not a basis for coverage.

## Local Injection Therapy

Various local anesthetics are approved by the FDA for use in diagnostic and therapeutic nerve blockade. Botulinum toxin-A (BTX-A or BOTOX) is a neurolytic agent that has also been approved by the FDA for treatment of some conditions. However, BTX-A is not specifically approved for treatment of cervicogenic headache or occipital neuralgia; the use of BTX-A for these diagnoses is off-label use.

## Radiofrequency Ablation (RFA)

RFA is a procedure and, therefore, is not subject to regulation by the FDA. However, the devices used to perform RFA are regulated by the FDA premarket approval process. There are numerous devices listed in the FDA 510(k) database approved for use in performing RFA. Two product codes are dedicated to these devices, one for radiofrequency lesion generators (GXD) and one for radiofrequency lesion probes (GXI). Additional information is available at:

<http://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cdrh/cfdocs/cfPMN/pmnm.cfm>. (Accessed March 3, 2023)

## Electrical Stimulation

Electrical stimulation of the occipital/cranial nerves for the treatment of occipital neuralgia, cervicogenic headache and migraines is a procedure and, therefore, not subject to regulation by the FDA; however, the devices used to perform electrical stimulation are regulated via the FDA 510(k) premarket approval process. There are numerous devices listed in the FDA 510(k) database with product codes GZF, GZB and PCC. Additional information is available at:

<http://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cdrh/cfdocs/cfPMN/pmnm.cfm>. (Accessed March 3, 2023)

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## Policy History/Revision Information

Date	Summary of Changes
10/01/2023	<p data-bbox="337 394 487 424"><b>Application</b></p> <p data-bbox="337 430 678 462"><b>Individual Exchange Plans</b></p> <ul data-bbox="337 468 1461 531" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="337 468 1461 531">• Removed language indicating this Medical Policy does not apply to Individual Exchange benefit plans in the states of Massachusetts, Nevada, and New York</li></ul> <p data-bbox="337 537 641 569"><b>Supporting Information</b></p> <ul data-bbox="337 575 917 602" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="337 575 917 602">• Archived previous policy version 2023T0080KK</li></ul>

## Instructions for Use

This Medical Policy provides assistance in interpreting UnitedHealthcare standard benefit plans. When deciding coverage, the member specific benefit plan document must be referenced as the terms of the member specific benefit plan may differ from the standard plan. In the event of a conflict, the member specific benefit plan document governs. Before using this policy, please check the member specific benefit plan document and any applicable federal or state mandates. UnitedHealthcare reserves the right to modify its Policies and Guidelines as necessary. This Medical Policy is provided for informational purposes. It does not constitute medical advice.

This Medical Policy may also be applied to Medicare Advantage plans in certain instances. In the absence of a Medicare National Coverage Determination (NCD), Local Coverage Determination (LCD), or other Medicare coverage guidance, CMS allows a Medicare Advantage Organization (MAO) to create its own coverage determinations, using objective evidence-based rationale relying on authoritative evidence ([Medicare IOM Pub. No. 100-16, Ch. 4, §90.5](#)).

UnitedHealthcare may also use tools developed by third parties, such as the InterQual® criteria, to assist us in administering health benefits. UnitedHealthcare Medical Policies are intended to be used in connection with the independent professional medical judgment of a qualified health care provider and do not constitute the practice of medicine or medical advice.