

02-20000-41

Original Effective Date: 01/15/13

Reviewed: 06/27/24

Revised: 07/15/24

## Subject: Surgical Treatment of Occipital Neuralgia and Headache

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### DESCRIPTION:

**Occipital neuralgia** is a distinct type of headache described as piercing, throbbing, or jabbing chronic pain, in the distribution of the greater or lesser occipital nerves. It is characterized by pain in the cervical and posterior areas of the head, and may or may not radiate to the sides of the head, or into the facial and frontal areas. Typically, the pain of occipital neuralgia begins in the neck and then spreads upwards. Some individuals may also experience pain in the scalp, forehead, or behind the eyes. The pain is caused by irritation or injury to the nerves, e.g., trauma, inflammation, gout, diabetes, vasculitis and localized infections. In many cases, however, no cause can be found.

Treatments for occipital neuralgia range from rest, heat, massage, exercise, antidepressants, nerve blocks, neurectomy, cervical rhizotomy, surgical release of the occipital nerve within the trapezius to neurolysis of the great occipital nerve with or without section of the inferior oblique muscle. However, the effectiveness of many of the invasive procedures has not been firmly established.

Migraine is a common headache disorder with a prevalence in the United States of approximately 18% in women and 6% in men. **Migraine without aura** is a recurrent headache disorder manifesting in attacks that last 4 to 72 hours. Typical characteristics of the headache are unilateral location, pulsating quality, moderate or severe intensity, aggravation by routine physical activity, and association with nausea and/or photophobia and phonophobia. **Migraine with aura** is a recurrent headache disorder manifesting in attacks of reversible focal neurologic symptoms that usually develop gradually over 5 to 20 minutes and last for less than 60 minutes. Headache with the features of migraine without aura usually follows the aura symptoms.

A variety of medications are used to treat acute migraine episodes. These include medications that are taken at the outset of an attack to abort the attack, and medications to treat the pain and other symptoms of migraines once they are established. Another proposed treatment of migraine headaches is surgical deactivation of trigger sites. The procedure was developed by plastic surgeon Dr. Bahman Guyuron, following observations that some patients who had cosmetic forehead lifts often reported improvement or elimination of migraine symptoms post-surgery. The procedure is based on the theory that migraine headaches arise due to inflammation of trigeminal nerve branches in the head and neck caused by irritation of the surrounding musculature, bony foramen, and perhaps fascia bands.

**Tension headache** is the most common type of headache in adults. These headaches are commonly referred to as stress headaches. A tension headache may appear periodically ("episodic," less than 15 days per month) or daily ("chronic," more than 15 days per month). An episodic tension headache may be described as a mild to moderate constant band-like pain, tightness, or pressure around the forehead or back of the head and neck.

**Cluster headache** refers to a type of headache that recurs over a period of time. People who have cluster headaches experience an episode one to three times per day during a period of time (the cluster period), which may last from two weeks to three months. People who suffer from cluster headaches get them at the same time each year, such as the spring or fall. A cluster headache typically awakens a person from sleep one to two hours after going to bed. These nocturnal attacks can be more severe than the daytime attacks. Cluster headaches can be more intense than a migraine attack. The headaches may disappear completely (go into "remission") for months or years, only to recur.

**Cervicogenic headache (CGH)** is a relatively common and still controversial form of headache caused by disease or dysfunction of structures in the cervical spine (e.g., congenital anomalies of the cranio-vertebral junction such as basilar invagination, and atlanto-axial dislocation; injury of the ligaments, muscles, or joints of the neck). It can be triggered by vascular or scar tissue compression of the C2 root and ganglion as well as irritation of other upper cervical nerve roots (e.g., C3, C4). In patients with CGH, attacks or chronic fluctuating periods of neck/head pain may be provoked and/or worsened by sustained neck movements or stimulation of ipsilateral tender points. There are no diagnostic imaging techniques of the cervical spine and associated structures that can determine the exact source of pain.

**Summary and Analysis of Evidence:** Three RCTs have evaluated surgical deactivation of headache trigger sites [Guyuron et al (2005); Guyuron et al (2009); Omranifard et al (2016)]. One RCT was double-blind and sham-controlled and the other 2 did not use a sham control or blinded patients. All 3 reported statistically significantly better outcomes at 12 months in patients who received decompression surgery for migraine headache than the control intervention. However, the trials were subject to methodologic limitations (eg, variability in surgical procedures, the potential use of cointerventions, issues related to patient selection, outcome validation and measurement). In addition, in 2 trials patients were unblinded and findings subject to the placebo effect. Furthermore, all 3 were single-center and 2 were conducted by the same research group headed by the inventor of the procedure. Additional multicenter and sham controlled randomized studies are needed. The American Headache Society (2013) approved a list of 5 items that provide low value in headache medicine. This list was produced as part of the American Board of Internal Medicine Foundation's Choosing Wisely initiative. One of the 5 recommendations was: "Don't recommend surgical deactivation of migraine trigger points outside of a clinical trial." The 2013 document stated that the value of this procedure is still a research question and that large, multicenter

randomized controlled trials with long-term follow-up are needed to provide accurate information on its benefits and harms. An UpToDate review “Cluster headache: Treatment and prognosis” (May, 2024) states, “Historically, a number of destructive surgical procedures have been used to treat chronic cluster headache. Procedures aimed at the sensory trigeminal nerve have targeted the trigeminal ganglion, supraorbital nerve, infraorbital nerve, and trigeminal root. Newer procedures have targeted the occipital nerves. Procedures directed at autonomic pathways have targeted the greater superficial petrosal nerve, nervus intermedius, and sphenopalatine ganglion. Surgical methods included radiofrequency thermocoagulation, glycerol ganglio-rhizolysis, alcohol injection, cocaine injection, gamma knife radiosurgery, and nerve sectioning. However, these treatments should be considered only with great caution because reliable long-term observational data are scarce and because complications have included trigeminal neuralgia, anesthesia dolorosa, hypesthesia, meningitis, and cerebrospinal fluid leak.” Another UpToDate review “Cervicogenic headache” (Watson, 2024) states, “Evidence of efficacy for surgery for cervicogenic headache is limited to small retrospective studies. Surgical decompression and microsurgical neurolysis of the C2 spinal nerve were reported in one series of 31 patients who met clinical criteria for cervicogenic headache, including headache relief from diagnostic block of the C2 spinal nerve. Treatment was associated with complete pain relief in 14 patients (45 percent) and “adequate improvement” in 16 (52 percent). Intensification of pain and anesthesia dolorosa are potential adverse outcomes that must be considered when contemplating the use of surgical interventions.” A review titled “Occipital neuralgia” (UpToDate; Garza, 2024) states, “Occipital nerve surgical decompression may benefit selected patients. In a small series of 11 patients with medically refractory occipital neuralgia, decompression at the level of the semispinalis capitis and trapezial tunnel was associated with pain resolution in three, significant pain relief in six, and no pain improvement in two patients over a mean follow-up period of approximately 12 months. In another series of patients with occipital neuralgia, pain resolved in 6 of 11 patients at six months following surgical decompression; one patient failed to get relief. However, surgical decompression is not a routine therapeutic measure and should be reserved for use in a tertiary care center with expertise in peripheral nerve neurosurgery.”

## **POSITION STATEMENT:**

Surgical release, decompression, destruction or excision of cranial nerves, or manipulation, resection or repositioning of any muscle, soft tissue, or blood vessels is considered **experimental or investigational** for treatment of occipital neuralgia and all types of headache.

These interventions include, but are not limited to:

- Neurectomy
- Nerve root decompression/microdecompression
- Ganglionectomy
- Transposition/transection/avulsion/manipulation/respositioning/resection of nerve, muscle or soft tissue
- Vascular ligation of superficial extracranial arteries
- Neuroplasty

- Rhizotomy

There is insufficient clinical evidence in the peer-reviewed literature to support the safety and effectiveness of these procedures.

## BILLING/CODING INFORMATION:

### CPT Coding:

There is no specific CPT code for this procedure but it may be reported using one of the following:

64716	Neuroplasty and/or transposition; cranial nerve (specify)
64722	Decompression; unspecified nerve(s); specify
64732	Transection or avulsion of; supraorbital nerve
64734	Transection or avulsion of; infraorbital nerve
64771	Transection or avulsion of other cranial nerve, extradural

## REIMBURSEMENT INFORMATION:

None applicable.

## PROGRAM EXCEPTIONS:

**Federal Employee Program (FEP):** Follow FEP guidelines.

**State Account Organization (SAO):** Follow SAO guidelines.

**Medicare Advantage:** No National Coverage Determination (NCD) and/or Local Coverage Determination (LCD) were found at the time of the last guideline reviewed date.

## DEFINITIONS:

None applicable.

## RELATED GUIDELINES:

[09-E0400, Oxygen](#)

[02-61000-06, Occipital Nerve Stimulation](#)

[02-61000-24, Deep Brain Stimulation and Responsive Neurostimulation](#)

## OTHER:

None applicable.

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### COMMITTEE APPROVAL:

This Medical Coverage Guideline (MCG) was approved by the Florida Blue Medical Policy and Coverage Committee on 06/27/24.

### GUIDELINE UPDATE INFORMATION:

01/15/13	New Medical Coverage Guideline.
12/15/13	Scheduled review. Position statement maintained. Updated references.
10/15/14	Scheduled review. Position statement maintained. Revised CPT coding. Updated references.
10/15/15	Scheduled review. Position statement maintained. Updated references.
11/15/16	Scheduled review. Revised Description section. Position statement maintained. Updated references.
11/15/17	Scheduled review. Position statement maintained. Updated references.
11/15/18	Scheduled review. Maintained position statement and updated references.
10/15/19	Scheduled review. Maintained position statement and updated references.
06/15/21	Scheduled review. Maintained position statement and updated references.
07/15/23	Scheduled review. Maintained position statement and updated references.
07/15/24	Scheduled review. Revised description and maintained position statement. Updated references.