I. Description

Barrett esophagus (BE) is a condition in which the normal squamous epithelium is replaced by specialized columnar-type epithelium, known as intestinal metaplasia. Intestinal metaplasia is a precursor to adenocarcinoma and may be treated with mucosal ablation techniques such as radiofrequency ablation (RFA) or cryoablation.

RFA of high-grade dysplasia (HGD) in BE has been shown to be at least as effective in eradicating HGD as other ablative techniques with a lower progression rate to cancer and may be considered as an alternative to esophagectomy. Therefore, RFA may be considered medically necessary for patients with BE and HGD.

For patients with low-grade dysplasia (LGD), one randomized control trial (RCT) has reported that RFA reduces progression to HGD and adenocarcinoma in patients with confirmed LGD. Based on the results of this RCT, other available evidence, specialty society guidelines, and the results of clinical vetting, it is possible to define a population with a higher risk of progression by having the initial LGD diagnosis confirmed by an additional pathologist who is an expert in gastrointestinal (GI) pathology. In this subpopulation of patients with an initial diagnosis of LGD, the benefit of treatment outweighs the risk. As a result, RFA of LGD may be considered medically necessary for patients with LGD when the initial diagnosis of LGD is confirmed by an expert in GI pathology.

For patients with nondysplastic BE, it cannot be concluded that the benefit of RFA outweighs the risk, and therefore RFA is considered not covered for this population.

Data for the efficacy of cryoablation of BE with or without dysplasia are limited. The studies consist of small numbers of patients with short-term follow-up, and therefore, cryoablation of BE is not covered.

II. Criteria/Guidelines

Radiofrequency ablation is covered (subject to Limitations and Administrative Guidelines) for the treatment of Barrett esophagus with high or low-grade dysplasia confirmed by two pathologists (see Policy Guidelines) prior to the procedure.
III. Policy Guidelines

Radiofrequency ablation for BE with high-grade dysplasia (HGD) may be used in combination with endoscopic mucosal resection of nodular/visible lesions. The diagnosis of HGD should be confirmed by two pathologists before RFA.

There is considerable interobserver variability in the diagnosis of low-grade dysplasia (LGD), and potential for overdiagnosis of LGD by nonexpert pathologists. This is due primarily to the difficulty in distinguishing inflammatory changes from LGD. There is literature evidence that expert GI pathologists will downgrade a substantial portion of biopsies that are initially read as LGD by nonexperts. As a result, it is ideal that two experts in GI pathology agree on the diagnosis to confirm LGD; this may result in greater than 75% of initial diagnoses of LGD being downgraded to nondysplasia. A review by a single expert GI pathologist will also result in a large number of LGD being downgraded, although probably not as many downgrades as achieved by two expert pathologists.

IV. Limitations

A. Radiofrequency ablation is not covered for the treatment of Barrett esophagus when the above criteria are not met, including but not limited to Barrett esophagus in the absence of dysplasia.

B. Cryoablation is not covered for the treatment of Barrett’s esophagus, with or without dysplasia.

V. Administrative Guidelines

A. Precertification is not required. The following documentation must be kept in the patient’s medical record and made available upon request:
   1. Current history and physical documenting the patient’s condition
   2. Pathology reports confirming the diagnosis of either high-grade dysplasia or low-grade dysplasia by at least two pathologists.

B. There are no CPT codes specific to radiofrequency ablation for Barrett’s esophagus. The procedure would likely be coded using one of the following CPT codes:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>CPT</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>43229</td>
<td>Esophagoscopy, flexible, transoral; with ablation of tumor(s), polyp(s), or other lesion(s) (includes pre and post-dilation and guide wire passage, when performed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>43270</td>
<td>Esophagogastroduodenoscopy, flexible, transoral; with ablation of tumor(s), polyp(s), or other lesion(s) (includes pre- and post-dilation and guide wire passage, when performed)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

VI. Background

Barrett Esophagus and the Risk of Esophageal Carcinoma

The esophagus is normally lined by squamous epithelium. Barrett’s esophagus is a condition in which the normal squamous epithelium is replaced by specialized columnar-type epithelium known
Endoscopic Radiofrequency ablation for Barrett Esophagus

as intestinal metaplasia, in response to irritation and injury caused by gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). Barrett’s esophagus occurs in the distal esophagus, may be of any length, focal or circumferential, and can be visualized by the endoscopist as being a different color than the background squamous mucosa. Confirmation of Barrett’s esophagus requires biopsy of the columnar epithelium and microscopic identification of intestinal metaplasia.

Intestinal metaplasia is a precursor to esophageal adenocarcinoma, and esophageal adenocarcinoma is thought to result from a stepwise accumulation of genetic abnormalities in the specialized epithelium, which results in the phenotypic expression of histologic features of low-grade dysplasia (LGD) to high-grade dysplasia (HGD) to carcinoma. Two large epidemiologic studies published in 2011 reported the risk of progression to cancer in patients with BE. One study reported the rate of progression to cancer in more than 8000 patients with a mean duration of follow-up of 7 years (range, 1-20 years). The de novo progression to cancer from BE at 1 year was 0.13%. The risk of progression was reported as 1.4% per year in patients with LGD and 0.17% per year in patients without dysplasia. This incidence translates into a risk of 10 to 11 times that of the general population. The other study identified over 11,000 patients with BE and, after a median follow-up of 5.2 years, reported that the annual risk of esophageal adenocarcinoma was 0.12%. Detection of LGD on index endoscopy was associated with an incidence rate for adenocarcinoma of 5.1 cases per 1000 person-years, and the incidence rate among patients without dysplasia was 1.0 case per 1000 person-years. Risk estimates for patients with HGD were slightly higher.

The reported risk of progression to cancer in BE in older studies was much higher, with an annual incidence of risk of 0.4% to 0.5% per year, with risk estimated at 30 to 40 times the general population. It is based on these higher risk estimates that current surveillance recommendations have been based.

Management of BE

The current management of BE includes treatment of GERD and surveillance endoscopy to detect progression to HGD or adenocarcinoma. The finding of LGD typically warrants only follow-up and surveillance biopsies, whereas the finding of HGD or early-stage adenocarcinoma warrants mucosal ablation or resection (either endoscopic mucosal resection [EMR] or esophagectomy).

EMR, either focal or circumferential, provides a histologic specimen for examination and staging (unlike ablative techniques). A study provided long-term results for EMR in 100 consecutive patients with early Barrett-associated adenocarcinoma (limited to the mucosa). The 5-year overall survival was 98%, and metachronous lesions were observed in 11% of patients after a mean of 36.7 months. In a review by Pech and Ell, the authors state that circumferential EMR of the entire segment of BE leads to a stricture rate of 50%, and recurrences occur at a rate of up to 11%.

Ablation Techniques

Mucosal ablation techniques that are available consist of 1 of several thermal (multipolar electrocoagulation [MPEC], argon plasma coagulation [APC], heater probe, Nd:YAG laser, KTP-YAG laser, diode laser, argon laser, and cryoablation) or nonthermal (5-ALA and Photofrin photodynamic therapy [PDT]) techniques. PDT has been shown in a randomized phase III trial to significantly decrease the risk of carcinoma in BE.
The CryoSpray Ablation System uses a low-pressure spray for spraying liquid nitrogen through an upper endoscope. Cryotherapy allows for treatment of uneven surfaces; however, disadvantages include the uneven application inherent in spraying the cryogen.

The HALO System from Barrx Medical, Inc. uses radiofrequency energy and consists of two components: an energy generator and an ablation catheter. The generator provides rapid (i.e., less than 1 second) delivery of a predetermined amount of radiofrequency energy to the catheter. Both the HALO90 and HALO360 are inserted into the esophagus with an endoscope, using standard endoscopic techniques. The HALO90 catheter is plate-based and used for focal ablation of areas of Barrett’s esophagus up to 3 cm. The HALO360 uses a balloon catheter that is sized to fit the individual esophagus, and is inflated to allow for circumferential ablation.

Ablation with radiofrequency affects only the most superficial layer of the esophagus (the mucosa), leaving the underlying tissues unharmed. Efficacy measures of the procedure include eradication of intestinal metaplasia without leaving behind microscopic (or “buried”) foci and post-ablation regrowth of the normal squamous epithelium. Reports of the efficacy of the HALO system in ablating Barrett’s esophagus have been as high as 70% (comparable to alternative methods of ablation [e.g., APC and MPEC]), and even higher in some reports. The incidence of leaving behind “buried” foci of intestinal metaplasia has been reported to be 20%–44% with APC and 7% with MPEC; reports using the HALO system have been 0%. Another potential advantage to the HALO system is that because it is automated, it eliminates operator-dependent error that may be seen with APC and MPEC.

Treating HGD or mucosal cancer solely with ablative techniques risks undertreating the approximately 10% of patients who have undetected submucosal cancer, in whom esophagectomy would have been required.

VII. Rationale

Radiofrequency Ablation for Barrett Esophagus

Radiofrequency ablation (RFA) has been accepted as a less invasive alternative to surgical mucosal resection or esophagectomy, based on the results of randomized and nonrandomized trials. Early single-arm trials reported high rates of success in eradication of dysplastic and metaplastic tissue, with low rates of adverse effects.

Systemic Reviews

In 2014 Chadwick et al reported on a systematic review which compared RFA and complete endoscopic resection (ER) for Barrett esophagus (BE). Twenty studies (22 articles) were reviewed including 2 randomized controlled trials (RCT), 10 cohort studies on ER and 8 cohort studies on RFA. The only study that compared RFA and ER was the RCT by van Vilsteren (described next). The other RCT was by Shaheen et al (also described next). The studies were heterogeneous in design. A total of 1087 (532 ER, 555 RFA) patients with high-grade dysplasia (HGD) or intramucosal cancer were included in the studies reviewed. The median number of resections or RFA sessions required for BE eradication was 2. Complete ER and RFA eradicated BE dysplasia in 95% and 92%, respectively. Eradication was maintained in 95% of ER patients at a median follow-up of 23 months and in 94% of RFA patients at a median follow-up of 21 months. Fewer RFA patients experienced short-term
adverse effects (2.5%) versus complete ER (12%). Esophageal strictures requiring additional treatment occurred in 4% of RFA patients and 38% of complete ER patients.

In 2013 Orman et al reported on a systematic review and meta-analysis of 24 studies with a total of 4342 patients treated with RFA for BE dysplasia and intestinal metaplasia. Included in the review were the van Vilsteren and Shaheen studies. The studies were heterogeneous in design and contained a mix of nondysplastic and LGD and HGD. The use of ER varied in the studies with a range of 0% to 96%. Patients were followed for a median of 20.5 months (range, 12-31 months). For patients treated with RFA, complete eradication of dysplasia occurred in 91% (95% confidence interval [CI], 87% to 95%), and complete eradication of intestinal metaplasia occurred in 78% (95% CI, 70% to 86%). Intestinal metaplasia recurred in 13% (95% CI, 9% to 18%) after eradication. In patients with complete eradication of intestinal metaplasia, 0.2% and 0.7% progressed to cancer during treatment and after treatment, respectively. The most frequent adverse even was esophageal stricture, which occurred in 5% of patients (95% CI, 3% to 7%).

Semlitsch et al reported a systematic review of this evidence for RFA of BE based on a total of 9 observational studies and 429 patients. Inclusion criteria for the systematic review required that studies include patients with BE and metaplasia or dysplasia for which RFA was the intervention (with or without endoscopic mucosal resection) and have a minimum follow-up period of 12 months. In 7 of the studies, the patients were treated with circumferential ablation followed by focal ablation, whereas 2 studies used only the circumferential method. The maximum number of ablations performed was reported in 7 studies and ranged from 2 to 5. Complete eradication of BE with dysplasia and metaplasia was achieved in 71 to 100% and 46 to 100% of patients, respectively. Six cases of esophageal stenosis and 1 case of buried intestinal metaplasia were reported among all patients.

Randomized Controlled Trials

Van Vilsteren et al reported on the results of a multicenter, randomized trial which compared the safety of stepwise radical endoscopic resection (SRER) versus focal ER followed by RFA for complete eradication of BE ≤5 cm containing HGD/early cancer. Patients in the SRER group underwent piecemeal ER of 50% of BE followed by serial ER. Patients in the ER/RFA group underwent focal ER for visible lesions followed by serial RFA. Follow-up endoscopy with biopsies (4-quadrant/2 cm BE) was performed at 6 and 12 months and then annually. Main outcome measures were: stenosis rate, complications, complete histologic response for neoplasia (CR-neoplasia); and complete histologic response for intestinal metaplasia (CR-IM). CR-neoplasia was achieved in 25 of 25 (100%) SRER and in 21 of 22 (96%) ER/RFA patients. CR-IM was achieved in 23 (92%) SRER and 21 (96%) ER/RFA patients. The stenosis rate was significantly higher in SRER (88%) versus ER/RFA (14%; p<0.001), resulting in more therapeutic sessions in SRER (6 vs 3; p<0.001) due to dilations. After median follow-up of 24 months, 1 SRER patient had recurrence of early cancer, requiring endoscopic resection. This study confirmed that both techniques achieve comparably high rates of CR-IM and CR-neoplasia but that SRER was associated with a higher number of complications and therapeutic sessions.

Section summary
RFA is a less-invasive alternative to surgical mucosal resection (SMR) and/or esophagectomy. Available research supports that RFA results in similar efficacy for disease that has not extended into the submucosa, with fewer complications.

RFA versus surveillance alone in BE

One randomized multicenter, sham-controlled trial has been published that compares RFA to surveillance alone in BE with dysplasia. This trial included patients with both HGD and LGD. A total of 127 patients with dysplastic BE were randomized in a 2:1 ratio to receive RFA or a sham procedure. The groups were randomly assigned according to the grade of dysplasia (low-grade [n=64] or high-grade [n=63]) and length of the BE (<4 cm or 4-8 cm). Patients in the RFA group could receive up to 4 ablation sessions, performed at baseline and at 2, 4, and 9 months. Primary outcomes were the proportion of patients who had complete eradication of dysplasia at 12 months and the proportion of all patients who had complete eradication of intestinal metaplasia at 12 months. The proportion of patients who had progression of dysplasia was a secondary outcome, this included progression of LGD to HGD or cancer, and the progression of HGD to cancer. This trial was included in the 2010 TEC Assessment and was rated fair on formal quality assessment according to the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force system. The only obstacles to a good rating were missing details about random sequence generation and concealment of allocation.

Overall, complete eradication of intestinal metaplasia was 77.4% in the ablation group compared with 2.3% of the control group (p<0.001). Patients who did not receive RFA were more likely to have disease progression (16.3%) than those who received RFA (3.6%; p=0.03). Three serious adverse events occurred in the RFA group, including 1 episode of upper gastrointestinal hemorrhage, which was treated endoscopically, 1 overnight hospitalization for new-onset chest pain 8 days after RFA, and 1 night of hospitalization for an episode of chest discomfort and nausea immediately after RFA. No adverse events were observed in the control group. No esophageal perforations or procedure-related deaths occurred. Among patients in the RFA group, esophageal stricture developed in 5 patients (6%), all of whom successfully underwent dilated endoscopy.

In 2011, 2- and 3-year results of this trial were reported. Subjects were followed for a mean time of 3.05 years, with 106 of 127 (83%) patients included in the analysis. Outcomes included eradication of dysplasia or intestinal metaplasia after 2 and 3 years, durability of response, disease progression, and adverse events. After 2 years, 101 of 106 patients had complete eradication of all dysplasia (95%) and 99 of 106 had eradication of intestinal metaplasia (93%). Serious adverse events occurred in 4 of 119 subjects (3.4%). No perforations or procedure-related deaths occurred. The rate of esophageal stricture was 7.6%. The rate of esophageal adenocarcinoma was 1 per 181 patient-years (0.55%/patient-years); there was no cancer-related morbidity or mortality. The annual rate of any neoplastic progression was 1 per 73 patient-years (1.37%/patient-years). The authors concluded that, for patients with dysplastic BE, RFA is durable and associated with a low rate of disease progression for up to 3 years.

Section Summary

The most direct evidence related to the efficacy of RFA for BE with dysplasia comes from one small-to-moderate, reasonably well-designed RCT comparing RFA with surveillance only in patients with...
Endoscopic Radiofrequency ablation for Barrett Esophagus

both low- and high-grade dysplasia. RFA was associated with lower risk of disease progression, compared with surveillance.

Radiofrequency Ablation for High-Grade Dysplasia

In patients diagnosed with BE with HGD, risk of progression to cancer is relatively high and esophageal adenocarcinoma is associated with poor morbidity and a 5-year survival rate of 13% or less. Therefore, intervention with esophagectomy or RFA may be strongly indicated.

The Shaheen RCT reported that RFA was successful in eradicating HGD, with complete eradication achieved in 81% of the ablation group versus 19% in the control group (p<0.001) at 12 months. This trial also confirmed a high risk of progression to cancer in patients with HGD and established that this progression was significantly reduced in patients treated with RFA. Among 63 patients with HGD in that trial, 19% in the control group progressed to cancer versus 2.4% in the RFA group (p=0.04). This represented a nearly 90% relative risk (RR) reduction for progression to cancer (RR=0.1; 95% CI, 0.01 to 1.0, p=0.04), and a number needed to treat of 6.0 to prevent 1 case of cancer over a 1-year period.

Longer-term follow-up at 2 to 3 years reported that complete eradication of dysplasia was maintained in most participants with initial HGD. For 54 patients with HGD available for follow-up, all dysplasia was eradicated in 50 of 54 (93%), and all intestinal metaplasia was eradicated in 48 of 54 (89%). After 3 years, dysplasia was eradicated in 55 of 56 of subjects (98%), and all intestinal metaplasia was eradicated in 51 of 56 (91%). More than 75% of high-grade patients remained free of intestinal metaplasia with a follow-up of longer than 3 years, with no additional therapy.

RFA may be used along with focal endoscopic resection. In a prospective interventional study that included 132 subjects with BE and HGD or early cancer treated with endoscopic resection followed by RFA, in intention-to-treat analysis, complete eradication of neoplasia and complete eradication of intestinal metaplasia occurred in 92% and 87% of subjects, respectively. Neoplasia or intestinal metaplasia reoccurred in 4% and 8% of subjects, respectively, at a median follow up of 27 months.

Section Summary.

For patients with BE and HGD, there is a relatively high risk of progression to cancer, and interventions to prevent progression are warranted. RFA results in high rates of complete eradication of dysplasia that is durable for at least 2 years. One RCT demonstrated that progression from HGD to cancer is reduced by approximately 90% following RFA, with rates of esophageal strictures of 6%.

Radiofrequency Ablation for Low-Grade Dysplasia

In 2014, Almond et al reported results of a meta-analysis of studies of endoscopic therapy in the treatment of BE with low-grade dysplasia (LGD). The analysis included 37 studies, 9 of which evaluated RFA alone, including the Shaheen et al RCT. Most studies were small, with the Shaheen et al RCT representing the largest study (n=52 with LGD treated with RFA). For patients treated with RFA, the pooled incidence of cancer or high grade dysplasia was 10.77 per 1000 patient years (95% CI 2.22 to 31.48 per 1000 patient years). For RFA- treated patients, pooled rates of complete eradication of intestinal metaplasia and complete eradication of dysplasia were 87.2% (95% CI 76.2% to 93.5%) and 90.6% (95% CI 81.0% to 95.6%), respectively.
A 2010 TEC Assessment on the use of RFA plus surveillance versus surveillance alone in the treatment of nondysplastic and LGD BE included the Shaheen et al randomized trial and 4 single-arm studies determined that the evidence was insufficient to permit conclusions for the use of RFA for patients with nondysplastic or low grade BE.

Since the TEC Assessment and the 2014 Almond et al systematic review, a randomized controlled trial of RFA versus surveillance in patients with LGD has been published. This trial randomized 140 patients with BE and confirmed LGD; four patients were excluded after randomization due to not meeting study inclusion criteria at further review, leaving a total of 136 patients in the modified intention-to-treat analysis. “Confirmed” LGD was defined as a diagnosis of LGD by the local pathologist with confirmation by a centralized expert panel of pathologists convened for the trial. The primary outcome measure was the occurrence of either high-grade dysplasia or adenocarcinoma up to 3 years following randomization. Secondary outcomes were complete eradication of dysplasia, the absence of intestinal metaplasia, and adverse events.

The study was terminated early due to interim analysis that determined superiority of RFA. At the time of termination all patients had reached the 24 month follow-up time point, and the median follow-up was 36 months. The occurrence of adenocarcinoma was significantly lower in the RFA group (1.5%) compared to the surveillance group (8.8%, p<0.03), and the occurrence of high-grade dysplasia was also significantly lower for the RFA group (1.5%) compared to the surveillance group (26.5%, p<0.001). For patients treated with RFA, complete eradication of dysplasia during follow-up was 98.4% and the absence of metaplasia was 90.0%. There were three serious adverse events in 2 patients who received RFA (1 abdominal pain requiring hospitalization, 1 bleeding episode, 1 episode of fever/chills following dilation for stricture), and a total of 12 other adverse events (8 strictures requiring dilation, 3 mucosal lacerations, 1 retrosternal pain).

In the Shaheen RCT, there were 64 patients with LGD and subgroup analysis was reported for these patients. At 12 months follow-up, the dysplasia was completely eradicated in 90.5% of those in the RFA group, compared with 22.7% of those in the control group (p<0.001). There were no patients in the LGD group who progressed to cancer over the initial 12 months. Progression to HGD was noted in 2 of 42 (5%) of patients in the RFA group, compared with 3 of 22 (14%) in the control group. The difference in rates of progression to HGD did not reach statistical significance (RR= 0.3; 95% CI, 0.1 to 1.9; p=0.33). After 2 years, there were 52 subjects available who had initial LGD treated with RFA. Progression from LGD to HGD or cancer occurred in 1 patient, for an estimated rate of 2.0% per patient per year. In patients with initial LGD, all dysplasia was eradicated in 51 of 52 (98%), and all intestinal metaplasia was eradicated in 51 of 52 (98%).

Selection of Patients with LGD

There are challenges in diagnostic differentiation between nondysplastic BE and BE with LGD that are important in the consideration of treatment for LGD. Both sampling bias and interobserver variability have been shown to be problematic. Therefore, analysis of progression to carcinoma in BE with intestinal metaplasia versus LGD is a challenge. Initial diagnosis of BE can be a challenge with respect to histologic grading because inflammation and LGD can share similar histologic characteristics.
One approach to risk-stratify patients with an initial diagnosis of low-grade dysplasia has been to use multiple pathologists, including experts in gastrointestinal (GI) histopathology, to confirm the initial diagnosis of LGD. There is a high degree of interobserver variability in pathologists’ reading of LGD versus inflammatory changes, and this variability in pathology diagnosis may contribute to the variable rates of progression of LGD reported in the literature. Kerkhof et al reported that in patients with an initial pathologic diagnosis of LGD, review by an expert pathologist will result in downgrading the initial diagnosis to nondysplasia in up to 50% of cases. Curvers et al tested this hypothesis in 147 patients with BE who were given an initial diagnosis of LGD. All pathology slides were then read by 2 expert GI pathologists with extensive experience in BE, with disagreements among experts resolved by consensus. After review by expert pathologists, 85% of initial diagnoses of LGD were downgraded to nondysplasia, leaving a total of only 22 of 147 patients (15%) with a confirmed diagnosis of LGD. All patients were followed for a mean of 5.1 years for progression to HGD or cancer. For patients with confirmed LGD, the rate of progression was 13.4%, compared with a rate of 0.5% for patients who had been downgraded to nondysplasia.

The strategy of having LGD confirmed by expert pathologists is supported by the results of the RCT by Phoa et al, which required confirmation of LGD by a central expert panel following initial diagnosis by a local pathologist. Of 511 patients with an initial diagnosis of LGD, 264 (52%) were excluded because the central expert panel reassigned classification of LGD, most often from LGD to indefinite or nondysplasia.

**Section Summary**

The risk of progression from LGD to cancer is not well-defined, with highly variable rates reported in the published literature. Evidence from randomized and nonrandomized studies has established that RFA can achieve complete eradication of dysplasia in patients with LGD that is durable for at least 2 years. One RCT of 136 patients reported a lower rate of progression to high-grade dysplasia or adenocarcinoma for patients treated with RFA who had confirmed LGD. This trial supports the strategy of selecting a population that has a higher risk of progression by subjecting the initial pathologic diagnosis of LGD to review by an expert in GI pathology. Expert review has been reported to reduce the number of patients diagnosed with LGD by 50% to 75%, presumably by reducing the number of patients with inflammatory changes who are mislabeled as having LGD.

**Radiofrequency Ablation for Nondysplastic Barrett Esophagus**

There are no RCTs that evaluate treatment of nondysplastic BE with RFA. The evidence on this question consists of single-arm trials that report outcomes of RFA. This evidence can provide useful data on the success in eradicating dysplasia, but cannot provide high-quality evidence on the comparative efficacy of RFA versus surveillance alone. Progression to cancer in nondysplastic BE is lower than that for LGD or HGD, with rates in the literature ranging from 0.05% to 0.5%.

Fleisher et al reported the 5-year follow-up of a single-arm study of patients with nondysplastic BE treated with RFA. The original study included 70 patients who underwent circumferential RFA and CR-IM; defined as complete eradication of nondysplastic BE, CR-IM was seen in 70% of patients at 1-year follow-up; patients with persistent BE underwent focal RFA. At the 2.5-year follow-up, CR-IM was found in 60 of 61 patients (98%). At 5-year follow-up, 4-quadrant biopsies were obtained from every 1 cm of the original extent of BE, and the authors reported the proportion of patients
demonstrating CR-IM. If nondysplastic BE was identified at the 5-year follow-up, focal RFA was performed 1 month later and re-biopsy 2 months after to assess histologic response. Primary outcomes were the proportion of patients demonstrating CR-IM at 5-year biopsy or after single session focal RFA. For the 5-year follow-up, there were 60 eligible patients, 50 (83%) of whom were willing to participate. Forty-six of 50 patients (92%) showed CR-IM at the 5-year biopsy visit. The 4 patients found to have BE at 5 years underwent a single session of RFA 1 month after biopsy, and all were found to have CR-IM at subsequent rebiopsy 2 months after RFA. No strictures were noted. The authors concluded that this first report of 5-year CR-IM outcomes lends support to the safety, efficacy, cost-utility, and reduction in neoplastic progression in treating nondysplastic BE with RFA.

Section Summary.
Nondysplastic BE has a relatively low rate of progression to cancer. Although available research reports that nondysplastic metaplasia can be eradicated by RFA, the risk/benefit ratio and the net effect on health outcomes is uncertain.

Radiofrequency Ablation Versus Photodynamic Therapy for Barrett Esophagus
In 2013 Ertan et al reported on a series of 86 consecutive patients treated with either PDT or RFA by a single investigator. RFA was administered to 47 patients with LGD and 6 patients with HGD. PDT was administered to 33 patients with HGD. Average time from ablative therapy to follow-up biopsy was 33 months (range, 24-48) for RFA and 44 months (range, 24-60) for PDT. RFA resulted in significantly more complete eradication than PDT (88.7% vs 54.5%, respectively, p=0.001). However, interpretation of this study is limited by its nonrandomized nature and differences in the type of dysplasia between groups.

Section summary
There is limited evidence to compare RFA with PDT for treatment of BE and no controlled trials. While evidence supports greater eradication rates with RFA over PDT, these data are not sufficient to determine the comparative efficacy of RFA compared with PDT.

Cryoablation of Barrett Esophagus
Published efficacy data for cryoablation in BE are limited. Johnston et al conducted a prospective, single-center pilot study in 11 men with BE and degrees of dysplasia ranging from none to multifocal HGD. The mean length of BE was 4.6 cm (range, 1-8 cm). After 6 month follow-up, complete histologic eradication of BE was achieved in 7 of the 9 patients (78%), completing the protocol.

An open-label, single-center, prospective, nonrandomized cohort study assessed the safety of cryoablation as a treatment option for BE with HGD or early cancer (intramucosal carcinoma). Thirty patients who were either deemed high-risk surgical candidates or who refused esophagectomy underwent cryoablation. Twenty-seven patients (90%) had downgrading of pathology stage after treatment. After a median follow-up period of 12 months, elimination of cancer or downgrading of HGD was 68% for HGD and 80% for intramucosal cancer.

Greenwald et al reported the safety, tolerability, and efficacy of low-pressure liquid nitrogen spray cryotherapy in 77 patients from multiple institutions who underwent a total of 377 procedures for
BE with HGD (58.4%), intramucosal carcinoma (16.9%), invasive carcinoma (13%), BE without dysplasia (9.1%), and severe squamous dysplasia (2.6%). The main outcome measurement was the incidence of serious adverse events and side effects from treatments. No side effects were reported by 28.6% of patients. The most common side effects were chest pain (18%), dysphagia (13%), odynophagia (12.1%), and sore throat (9.6%). Esophageal stricture occurred in 3 patients, all of which were successfully treated with dilation, and gastric perforation occurred in 1 patient. CR for HGD, all dysplasia, intestinal metaplasia, and cancer were assessed in patients completing therapy during the study period and having at least 1 follow-up endoscopy with biopsy for assessment of histologic regression of the underlying lesion (n=23). For patients with HGD (n=17), CR of the HGD, any dysplasia, and intestinal metaplasia was 94%, 88%, and 53%, respectively. For patients with intramucosal carcinoma (n=4), 100% had CR of the cancer, HGD, and any dysplasia, and 75% had CR of intestinal metaplasia. For the patients with invasive cancer (n=3), 100% had CR of the cancer, HGD, and any dysplasia, and 67% of intestinal metaplasia.

Shaheen et al reported on a multicenter, retrospective cohort study of 98 consecutive patients with BE with HGD treated with spray cryotherapy to assess safety and efficacy. A total of 333 treatments (mean 3.4 per patient) were performed, and cryotherapy was performed with the intent to eradicate all BE. Sixty patients completed all planned cryotherapy treatments and were assessed for efficacy with follow-up endoscopy sessions with 4 quadrant biopsies performed every 1 to 2 cm. Fifty-eight patients (97%) had complete eradication of HGD, 52 (87%) had complete eradication of all dysplasia with persistent nondysplastic intestinal metaplasia, and 34 (57%) had complete eradication of all intestinal metaplasia. There were no esophageal perforations, and esophageal stricture occurred in 3 patients. The authors noted the limitations of the study as it was a nonrandomized, retrospective without a control group, lacked centralized pathology, used surrogate outcomes for decreased cancer risk, and had a short follow-up (10.5 months).

Section summary

There is limited evidence on the use of cryoablation for treatment of BE and no controlled trials. The evidence from uncontrolled studies report high rates of success in eradicating dysplasia, with low rates of complications. These data are not sufficient to determine the comparative efficacy of cryoablation compared with RFA.

Ongoing and Unpublished Clinical Trials

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

Table 1. Summary of Key Trials

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<th>Trial Name</th>
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Clinical Input Received Through Physician Specialty Societies and Academic Medical Centers

While the various physician specialty societies and academic medical centers may collaborate with and make recommendations during this process, through the provision of appropriate reviewers, input received does not represent an endorsement or position statement by the physician specialty societies or academic medical centers, unless otherwise noted.

In response to requests in 2009, input was received related to use of RFA (cryoablation was not included in the request) from 3 academic medical centers and one specialty society (with a total of 12 reviewers). All reviewers agreed that RFA should be considered medically necessary for the treatment of BE with HGD. The reviewers were split for the use of RFA for LGD, with 9 in favor of it being medically necessary and 4 considering it not medically necessary.

Clinical input was again requested when this policy was under review in 2012, with focus on the treatment of LGD. At this time, input was received from reviewers at 6 academic medical centers and from one subspecialty medical society. For the treatment of LGD, input was mixed, with 2 reviewers stating that RFA for LGD should be investigational, 3 indicating that it should be medically necessary, and 2 indicating that it was a split decision. There was general consensus among reviewers that there are subpopulations of patients with LGD who have higher risk and should therefore be treated. Reviewers mentioned the confirmation of LGD diagnosis by multiple pathologists, and/or the application of clinical high-risk factors such as lesion length, as factors that were useful to define higher-risk populations that warrant treatment.

Summary of Evidence

RFA of high-grade dysplasia (HGD) in BE has been shown to be at least as effective in eradicating HGD as other ablative techniques with a lower progression rate to cancer and may be considered as an alternative to esophagectomy. Therefore, RFA may be considered medically necessary for patients with BE and HGD.

For patients with low-grade dysplasia (LGD), 1 RCT has reported that RFA reduces progression to high-grade dysplasia and adenocarcinoma in patients with confirmed LGD. Based on the results of this RCT, other available evidence, specialty society guidelines, and the results of clinical vetting, it is possible to define a population with a higher risk of progression by having the initial LGD diagnosis confirmed by an additional pathologist who is an expert in gastrointestinal (GI) pathology. In this subpopulation of patients with an initial diagnosis of LGD, the benefit of treatment outweighs the risk. As a result, RFA of LGD may be considered medically necessary for patients with LGD when the initial diagnosis of LGD is confirmed by an expert in GI pathology.

For patients with nondysplastic BE, it cannot be concluded that the benefit of RFA outweighs the risk, and therefore RFA is considered investigational for this population. Data for the efficacy of cryoablation of BE with or without dysplasia are limited. The studies consist of small numbers of patients with short-term follow-up, and therefore, cryoablation of BE is not covered.
Endoscopic Radiofrequency ablation for Barrett Esophagus

Practice Guidelines and Position Statements

The American Gastroenterological Association

The AGA Medical Position Statement on the management of Barrett esophagus recommends endoscopic eradication therapy with RFA, photodynamic therapy or endoscopic mucosal resection rather than surveillance for treatment of patients with confirmed high-grade dysplasia within Barrett’s esophagus. They also state that:

- Although endoscopic eradication therapy is not suggested for the general population of patients with Barrett’s esophagus in the absence of dysplasia, they suggest that RFA, with or without endoscopic mucosal resection, should be a therapeutic option for select individuals with non-dysplastic Barrett’s esophagus who are judged to be at increased risk for progression to high-grade dysplasia or cancer but that specific criteria that identify this population have not been fully defined at this time.

- Endoscopic eradication therapy with RFA should also be a therapeutic option for treatment of patients with confirmed low-grade dysplasia in Barrett esophagus.

The current literature is inadequate to recommend endoscopic eradication therapy with cryotherapy for patients with confirmed low-grade or high-grade dysplasia within Barrett esophagus or patients judged to be at high risk for progression to high-grade dysplasia or esophageal carcinoma. Further studies are needed to assess whether reversion to squamous epithelium can persist long-term after cryotherapy.

American College of Gastroenterology

The ACG published updated guidelines for the management of BE in 2008. The following recommendations were included:

- Any initial diagnosis of dysplasia, both HGD and LGD, requires confirmation by an expert in GI pathology.
- HGD, when confirmed by an expert, represents a threshold for intervention.
- LGD, when confirmed by an expert, requires more frequent endoscopy and biopsy.

Society of American Gastrointestinal and Endoscopic Surgeons

The Society of American Gastrointestinal and Endoscopic Surgeons published guidelines on the surgical treatment of gastroesophageal reflux disease, which included recommendations for the treatment of BE. These guidelines included the following statements:

- High-grade dysplasia and intramucosal carcinoma can be effectively treated with endoscopic therapy including photodynamic therapy (PDT), endoscopic mucosal resection (EMR), and RFA, alone or in combination (grade B).
- Antireflux surgery may be performed in a patient with non-neoplastic intestinal metaplasia, indeterminate dysplasia, or low-grade dysplasia, with or without endoscopic therapy to eradicate the Barrett’s tissue. Specifically, RFA has been shown to be safe, clinically effective, and cost-effective in these disease states and may be performed in eligible patients before, during, or after antireflux surgery (grade B).
National Comprehensive Cancer Network

National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) guidelines for esophageal cancer make the following recommendations about early-stage esophageal adenocarcinomas:

- For pTis stage disease (high grade dysplasia): endoscopic therapies (ER [endoscopic resection], ablation, or ER followed by ablation) are preferred (Category 2A recommendation).
- For pT1a stage disease (tumor invades lamina propria or muscularis mucosa): endoscopic therapies (ER or ER followed by ablation) are preferred (Category 2A recommendation).
- For superficial pT1b stage disease (tumor invades submucosa): endoscopic resection (ER followed by ablation) or esophagectomy is recommended (Category 2A recommendation).

The recommendations state that ER of focal nodules in the setting of early-stage disease should be performed.

For post-treatment surveillance, the guidelines state that ablation of residual flat or recurrent high-grade and LGD using RFA or cryoablation should be considered. Ablation of nondysplastic BE is not recommended.

Medicare National Coverage

There is no national coverage determination (NCD). In the absence of an NCD, coverage decisions are left to the discretion of local Medicare carriers.

VIII. Important Reminder

The purpose of this Medical Policy is to provide a guide to coverage. This Medical Policy is not intended to dictate to providers how to practice medicine. Nothing in this Medical Policy is intended to discourage or prohibit providing other medical advice or treatment deemed appropriate by the treating physician.

Benefit determinations are subject to applicable member contract language. To the extent there are any conflicts between these guidelines and the contract language, the contract language will control.

This Medical Policy has been developed through consideration of the medical necessity criteria under Hawaii’s Patients’ Bill of Rights and Responsibilities Act (Hawaii Revised Statutes §432E-1.4), generally accepted standards of medical practice and review of medical literature and government approval status. HMSA has determined that services not covered under this Medical Policy will not be medically necessary under Hawaii law in most cases. If a treating physician disagrees with HMSA’s determination as to medical necessity in a given case, the physician may request that HMSA reconsider the application of the medical necessity criteria to the case at issue in light of any supporting documentation.

IX. References


24. Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association Technology Evaluation Center (TEC). Radiofrequency ablation of nondysplastic or low-grade dysplastic Barrett's esophagus. TEC Assessments 2010; Volume 25, No. 5.


