

## Clinical Policy: Air Ambulance

Reference Number: CP.MP.175

Date of Last Revision: 05/24

[Coding Implications](#)

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See [Important Reminder](#) at the end of this policy for important regulatory and legal information.

### Description

There are two categories of air ambulance services: fixed wing (airplane) and rotary wing (helicopter) aircraft. Fixed wing (FW) or rotary wing (RW) air ambulance are furnished when the medical condition is such that transport by ground ambulance, in whole or in part, is not appropriate. This policy describes medical necessity criteria for air ambulance transportation.

### Policy/Criteria

- I.** It is the policy of health plans affiliated with Centene Corporation® that *air ambulance (fixed wing or rotary wing) transportation* is **medically necessary** when all the following criteria are met:
- A. Transport by either basic or advanced life support ground ambulance would endanger the health or threaten survival of the member/enrollee. Some examples of applicable conditions include, but are not limited to:
    - 1. Intracranial bleeding requiring neurosurgical intervention;
    - 2. Cardiogenic shock;
    - 3. Burns requiring treatment in a burn center;
    - 4. Conditions requiring treatment in a Hyperbaric Oxygen Unit;
    - 5. Multiple severe injuries;
    - 6. Life-threatening trauma;
    - 7. Cerebrovascular infarction with the need for tissue plasminogen activator (tPA) at a certified stroke center;
  - B. The location of the member/enrollee needing transport meets any of the following:
    - 1. The point of pickup is inaccessible by ground vehicle (this condition could be met in Hawaii, Alaska, and in other remote or sparsely populated areas of the continental United States);
    - 2. Great distances or other obstacles, including traffic, or travel time exceeding 30 to 60 minutes, are involved in getting the patient to the nearest hospital with appropriate facilities via ground transportation (examples: burn care, cardiac care, trauma care, critical care, etc.);
  - C. If transport is requested from one facility to the other, the transferring facility does not have the appropriate services and physician specialists to provide the necessary medical care (e.g., trauma unit, burn unit, cardiac care unit, or pediatric specialty services).
- II.** It is the policy of health plans affiliated with Centene Corporation that *air ambulance transportation* is **not medically necessary** for any of the following:
- A. Member/enrollee is legally pronounced dead before the ambulance is called;
  - B. Transportation is provided primarily for the convenience of the member/enrollee, member's/enrollee's family, or the physician;
  - C. Transportation to a facility that is not an acute care hospital, such as a nursing facility, physician's office, or home;

- D. Transportation to receive a service considered not medically necessary, even if the destination is an appropriate facility.

**Background**

Air ambulances are used to expeditiously transport critically ill patients during life-threatening emergencies when either great distances or other obstacles such as heavy traffic, preclude such rapid delivery to the nearest appropriate facility.<sup>4</sup> Transport by air ambulance may also be necessary when accessibility by a ground ambulance is not possible. Air ambulance transportation is widely regarded as having a beneficial impact on improving the chances of survival and recovery for trauma victims and other critical patients, particularly in rural areas that lack readily accessible advanced-care facilities such as trauma or burn centers. According to the Association of Air Medical Services, it is estimated that in the United States over 550,000 patients utilize air ambulance services each year.<sup>4</sup>

Rotary wing transport is ideal for transporting critical trauma patients from the scene as they have the ability to land close to the scene of the incident. They can also be utilized for emergent facility-to-facility transport, however, fuel capacity gives them a relatively short range. The fixed wing aircraft is generally used for emergent facility-to-facility transports when a patient must be transported a long distance.<sup>4</sup> They have the ability to travel at much faster speeds than helicopters, with ranges over 500 miles at speeds between 200 to 300 mph.<sup>7</sup> Runway requirements for takeoff and landing restrict airplanes, and the patient will usually need one or more transfers involving a ground unit to move them to/from the runway/airport. Fixed wing aircraft provides a transparent hospital-like environment with cardiac monitoring, invasive hemodynamic monitoring, infusion therapy, pulse oximetry, emergency medication, defibrillation with pacing capabilities, and advanced airway management capabilities and is staffed with a flight crew specially trained to provide emergency and critical care medical support.

**Coding Implications**

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CPT® Codes	Description
N/A	

HCPCS Codes	Description
A0430	Ambulance service, conventional air services, transport, one way (fixed wing)

<b>HCPCS Codes</b>	<b>Description</b>
A0431	Ambulance service, conventional air services, transport, one way (rotary wing)
A0435	Fixed wing air mileage, per statute mile
A0436	Rotary wing air mileage, per statute mile
S9960	Ambulance service, conventional air services, nonemergency transport, one way (fixed wing)
S9961	Ambulance service, conventional air service, nonemergency transport, one way (rotary wing)

<b>Reviews, Revisions, and Approvals</b>	<b>Revision Date</b>	<b>Approval Date</b>
Policy developed	03/19	4/19
References reviewed and updated	02/20	03/20
Specified that operational capability of rotary wing aircraft is a minimum of 200-250 miles.	05/20	
Renamed policy from Fixed Wing Air Transportation to Air Ambulance. Removed criteria for fixed wing stating that transport distance exceeds that of rotary wing. Applied other fixed wing criteria to both rotary and fixed wing. Added example conditions; added that member location be inaccessible by ground transport, and that obstacles to ground transportation are present, such as great distances, heavy traffic, or travel time over 30-60. Added indications for which air ambulance transport is not considered medically necessary.	08/20	08/20
Changed I.B. to say that “any” of the following should be met, instead of “one.”	04/21	
Annual review. References reviewed, updated and reformatted to AMA. Replaced “member” with “member/enrollee” throughout document. Specialty review completed. Changed “Last Review Date” in header to “Date of Last Revision” and changed “Date” in Revision log to “Revision Date”.	08/21	08/21
Annual Review. Background updated with no impact on criteria. References reviewed and updated.	06/22	06/22
Annual review. References reviewed and updated. Reviewed by internal specialist.	06/23	06/23
Annual review. Under I.A.7. expanded criteria example to include cerebrovascular infarction with the need for tissue plasminogen activator (tPA) at a certified stroke center. References reviewed and updated. Reviewed by external specialist.	05/24	05/24

**References**

1. Medicare Benefits Policy Manual, Chapter 10 - Ambulance Services. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. <https://www.cms.gov/Regulations-and->

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- [Guidance/Guidance/Manuals/downloads/bp102c10.pdf](#) Published July 11, 2014. Revised April 13, 2018. Accessed March 18, 2024.
2. Thomas SH, Brown KM, Oliver ZJ, et al. An Evidence-based Guideline for the air medical transportation of prehospital trauma patients. *Prehosp Emerg Care*. 2014;18 Suppl 1:35-44. doi:10.3109/10903127.2013.844872
  3. Sasser SM, Hunt RC, Faul M, et al. Guidelines for field triage of injured patients: recommendations of the National Expert Panel on Field Triage, 2011. *MMWR Recomm Rep*. 2012;61(RR-1):1-20.
  4. Report of the Council on Medical Service. Air Ambulance Regulations and Payments: CMS Report 2-I-18. <https://www.ama-assn.org/system/files/2018-12/i18-cms-report2.pdf>. Published 2018. Accessed March 18, 2024.
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  9. Medicare claims processing manual: chapter 15 – ambulance. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. <https://www.cms.gov/Regulations-and-Guidance/Guidance/Manuals/downloads/clm104c15.pdf>. Published October 2014 (revised October 13, 2022). Accessed March 18, 2024.
  10. Floccare DJ, Stuhlmiller DF, Braithwaite SA, et al. Appropriate and safe utilization of helicopter emergency medical services: a joint position statement with resource document. *Prehosp Emerg Care*. 2013;17(4):521-525. doi:10.3109/10903127.2013.804139

**Important Reminder**

This clinical policy has been developed by appropriately experienced and licensed health care professionals based on a review and consideration of currently available generally accepted standards of medical practice; peer reviewed medical literature; government agency/program approval status; evidence based guidelines and positions of leading national health professional organizations; views of physicians practicing in relevant clinical areas affected by this clinical policy; and other available clinical information. The Health Plan makes no representations and accepts no liability with respect to the content of any external information used or relied upon in developing this clinical policy. This clinical policy is consistent with standards of medical practice current at the time that this clinical policy was approved. “Health Plan” means a health

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This clinical policy is effective as of the date determined by the Health Plan. The date of posting may not be the effective date of this clinical policy. This clinical policy may be subject to applicable legal and regulatory requirements relating to provider notification. If there is a discrepancy between the effective date of this clinical policy and any applicable legal or regulatory requirement, the requirements of law and regulation shall govern. The Health Plan retains the right to change, amend or withdraw this clinical policy, and additional clinical policies may be developed and adopted as needed, at any time.

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**Note: For Medicaid members/enrollees**, when state Medicaid coverage provisions conflict with the coverage provisions in this clinical policy, state Medicaid coverage provisions take precedence. Please refer to the state Medicaid manual for any coverage provisions pertaining to this clinical policy.

**Note: For Medicare members/enrollees**, to ensure consistency with the Medicare National Coverage Determinations (NCD) and Local Coverage Determinations (LCD), all applicable NCDs, LCDs, and Medicare Coverage Articles should be reviewed prior to applying the criteria

## CLINICAL POLICY

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set forth in this clinical policy. Refer to the CMS website at <http://www.cms.gov> for additional information.

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