Item/Service Description

A. General

1. Method of Operation

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), formerly called nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR), is a non-invasive method of graphically representing the distribution of water and other hydrogen-rich molecules in the human body. In contrast to conventional radiographs or computed tomography (CT) scans, in which the image is produced by x-ray beam attenuation by an object, MRI is capable of producing images by several techniques. In fact, various combinations of MRI image production methods may be employed to emphasize particular characteristics of the tissue or body part being examined. The basic elements by which MRI produces an image are the density of hydrogen nuclei in the object being examined, their motion, and the relaxation times, and the period of time required for the nuclei to return to their original states in the main, static magnetic field after being subjected to a brief additional magnetic field. These relaxation times reflect the physical-chemical properties of tissue and the molecular environment of its hydrogen nuclei. Only hydrogen atoms are present in human tissues in sufficient concentration for current use in clinical MRI.

2. General Clinical Utility

Overall, MRI is a useful diagnostic imaging modality that is capable of demonstrating a wide variety of soft-tissue lesions with contrast resolution equal or superior to CT scanning in various parts of the body.

Among the advantages of MRI are the absence of ionizing radiation and the ability to achieve high levels of tissue contrast resolution without injected iodinated radiological contrast agents. Recent advances in technology have resulted in development and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval of new paramagnetic contrast agents for MRI which allow even better visualization in some instances. Multi-slice imaging and the ability to image in multiple planes, especially sagittal and coronal, have provided flexibility not easily available with other modalities. Because cortical (outer layer) bone and metallic prostheses do not cause distortion of MR images, it has been possible to visualize certain lesions and body regions with greater certainty than has been possible with CT. The use of MRI on
certain soft tissue structures for the purpose of detecting disruptive, neoplastic, degenerative, or inflammatory lesions has now become established in medical practice.

**Indications and Limitations of Coverage**

**B. Nationally Covered MRI Indications**

1. **MRI**

Although several uses of MRI are still considered investigational and some uses are clearly contraindicated (see subsection C), MRI is considered medically efficacious for a number of uses. Use the following descriptions as general guidelines or examples of what may be considered covered rather than as a restrictive list of specific covered indications. Coverage is limited to MRI units that have received FDA premarket approval, and such units must be operated within the parameters specified by the approval. In addition, the services must be reasonable and necessary for the diagnosis or treatment of the specific patient involved.

   a) Effective November 22, 1985:
      a. MRI is useful in examining the head, central nervous system, and spine.
      b. Multiple sclerosis can be diagnosed with MRI and the contents of the posterior fossa are visible.
      c. The inherent tissue contrast resolution of MRI makes it an appropriate standard diagnostic modality for general neuroradiology.

   b) Effective November 22, 1985:
      a. MRI can assist in the differential diagnosis of mediastinal and retroperitoneal masses, including abnormalities of the large vessels such as aneurysms and dissection.
      b. When a clinical need exists to visualize the parenchyma of solid organs to detect anatomic disruption or neoplasia, this can be accomplished in the liver, urogenital system, adrenals, and pelvic organs without the use of radiological contrast materials. When MRI is considered reasonable and necessary, the use of paramagnetic contrast materials may be covered as part of the study.
      c. MRI may also be used to detect and stage pelvic and retroperitoneal neoplasms and
d      d. to evaluate disorders of cancellous bone and soft tissues.
e      It may also be used in the detection of pericardial thickening.
f. Primary and secondary bone neoplasm and aseptic necrosis can be detected at an early stage and monitored with MRI.
g. Patients with metallic prostheses, especially of the hip, can be imaged in order to detect the early stages of infection of the bone to which the prosthesis is attached.

   c) Effective March 22, 1994:
      a. MRI may also be covered to diagnose disc disease without regard to whether radiological imaging has been tried first to diagnose the problem.

   d) Effective March 4, 1991:
      a. MRI with gating devices and surface coils, and gating devices that eliminate distorted images caused by cardiac and respiratory movement cycles are now considered state of the art techniques and may be covered. Surface and other specialty coils may also be covered, as they are used routinely for high resolution
imaging where small limited regions of the body are studied. They produce high signal-to-noise ratios resulting in images of enhanced anatomic detail.

C. Contraindications and Nationally Non-Covered Indications

1. Contraindications

The MRI is not covered when the following patient-specific contraindications are present:

MRI is not covered for patients with cardiac pacemakers or with metallic clips on vascular aneurysms unless the Medicare beneficiary meets the provisions of the following exceptions:

Effective July 7, 2011, the contraindications will not apply to pacemakers when used according to the FDA-approved labeling in an MRI environment.

2. Nationally Non-Covered Indications

CMS has determined that MRI of cortical bone and calcifications, and procedures involving spatial resolution of bone and calcifications, are not considered reasonable and necessary indications within the meaning of section 1862(a)(1)(A) of the Act, and are therefore non-covered.

D. Other

Effective June 3, 2010, all other uses of MRI or MRA for which CMS has not specifically indicated coverage or non-coverage continue to be eligible for coverage through individual local MAC discretion.
NIA CLINICAL GUIDELINE FOR CHEST (THORAX) MRI:

INTRODUCTION:

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) is a noninvasive imaging technique for detection and evaluation of various disease and conditions in the chest, e.g., congenital anomalies and aneurysms. MRI may be used instead of computed tomography (CT) in patients with allergies to radiographic contrast or with impaired renal function.

INDICATIONS FOR CHEST MRI:

- For evaluation of mediastinal or hilar mass of patient with renal failure or allergy to contrast material.
- For evaluation of myasthenia gravis with suspected thymoma.
- For evaluation of brachial plexus dysfunction (brachial plexopathy/thoracic outlet syndrome).
- For evaluation of a thoracic/thoracoabdominal aneurysm or dissection (documentation of clinical history may include hypertension and reported “tearing or ripping type” chest pain.
- For evaluation of congenital heart disease and malformations, [e.g., aortic arch anomalies and patent ductus arteriosus (PDA)].
- For evaluating whether masses invade into specific thoracic structures (e.g. aorta, pulmonary artery, brachial plexus, subclavian vessels, or thoracic spine).
- To determine the consistency of thoracic masses (cystic vs. solid vs. mixed).

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION RELATED TO CHEST MRI:

Request for a follow-up study - A follow-up study may be needed to help evaluate a patient’s progress after treatment, procedure, intervention or surgery. Documentation requires a medical reason that clearly indicates why additional imaging is needed for the type and area(s) requested.

MRI imaging – Metal devices or foreign body fragments within the body, such as indwelling pacemakers and intracranial aneurysm surgical clips that are not compatible with the use of MRI, may be contraindicated. Other implanted metal devices in the patient as well as external devices such as portable O₂ tanks may also be contraindicated.

MRI and Myasthenia Gravis – Myasthenia Gravis is a chronic autoimmune disease characterized by weakness of the skeletal muscles causing fatigue and exhaustion that is aggravated by activity and relieved by rest. It most often affects the ocular and other cranial muscles and is thought to be caused by the presence of circulating antibodies. Symptoms include ptosis, diplopia, chewing difficulties, and dysphagia. Thymoma has a known association with myasthenia. Contrast-enhanced MRI may be used to identify the presence of a mediastinal mass suggestive of myasthenia gravis in patients with renal failure or allergy to contrast material.

MRI and Thoracic Outlet Syndrome – Thoracic outlet syndrome is a group of disorders involving compression at the superior thoracic outlet that affects the brachial plexus, the subclavian artery and veins. It refers to neurovascular complaints due to compression of the
brachial plexus or the subclavian vessels. Magnetic resonance multi-plane imaging shows bilateral images of the thorax and brachial plexus and can demonstrate the compression of the brachial plexus and venous obstruction.

MRI and Brachial Plexus - MRI is the only diagnostic tool that accurately provides high resolution imaging of the brachial plexus. The brachial plexus is formed by the cervical ventral rami of the lower cervical and upper thoracic nerves which arise from the cervical spinal cord, exit the bony confines of the cervical spine, and traverse along the soft tissues of the neck, upper chest, and course into the arms.

MRI and Patent Ductus Arteriosus – Patent ductus arteriosus (PDA) is a congenital heart problem in which the ductus arteriosus does not close after birth. It remains patent allowing oxygen-rich blood from the aorta to mix with oxygen-poor blood from the pulmonary artery. MRI can depict the precise anatomy of a PDA to aid in clinical decisions. It allows imaging in multiple planes without a need for contrast administration. Patients are not exposed to ionizing radiation.

MRI and Aortic Coarctation – Aortic coarctation is a congenital narrowing of the aorta. In the past, angiography was used to evaluate aortic coarctation. However, MRI, allowing excellent anatomic and functional evaluation of the aortic coarctation, may replace angiography as the first line modality for evaluating this condition.
REFERENCES


