

Medical Coverage Policy | Percutaneous Left Atrial Appendage Closure Devices for Stroke Prevention in Atrial Fibrillation



EFFECTIVE DATE: 12|01|2022

POLICY LAST UPDATED: 08|17|2022

OVERVIEW

Stroke prevention in patients with atrial fibrillation (AF) is an important goal of treatment. Treatment with anticoagulant medications is the most common approach to stroke prevention. Because most embolic strokes originate from the left atrial appendage, occlusion of the left atrial appendage may offer a nonpharmacologic alternative to anticoagulant medications to lower the risk of stroke. Multiple percutaneously deployed devices are being investigated for left atrial appendage closure (LAAC). Two types of left atrial appendage devices (the Watchman and Amplatzer Amulet devices) have approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for stroke prevention in patients with AF.

MEDICAL CRITERIA

Medicare Advantage Plans

Not applicable.

Commercial Products

The use of a device with U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval for percutaneous left atrial appendage closure (e.g., the Watchman or Amplatzer Amulet) may be considered **medically necessary** for the prevention of stroke in patients with atrial fibrillation when the following criteria is met:

- There is an increased risk of stroke and systemic embolism based on CHADS2 score or CHA2DS2-VASc score, and;
- Systemic anticoagulation therapy is recommended, and;
- The long-term risks of systemic anticoagulation outweigh the risks of the device implantation

PRIOR AUTHORIZATION

Medicare Advantage Plans

Not applicable

Commercial Products

Prior authorization is recommended and obtained via the online tool for participating providers. See Related Policies section.

POLICY STATEMENT

Medicare Advantage Plans

Percutaneous left atrial appendage closure approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) may be considered medically necessary for patients enrolled in a Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) approved clinical trial. Refer to Related Policy section.

Note: Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island (BCBSRI) must follow Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) guidelines, such as national coverage determinations or local coverage determinations for all Medicare Advantage Plans policies. Therefore, Medicare Advantage Plans policies may differ from Commercial products. In some instances, benefits for Medicare Advantage Plans may be greater than what is allowed by the CMS.

Commercial Products

Percutaneous left atrial appendage closure is considered medically necessary when the criteria above is met.

The use of other percutaneous left atrial appendage closure devices, including but not limited to the Lariat and Amplatzer Cardiac Plug devices, for stroke prevention in patients with atrial fibrillation is considered not medically necessary because these devices do not have FDA approval for left atrial appendage (LAA) closure. In addition, the evidence is insufficient to determine the effects of the technology on health outcomes.

COVERAGE

Benefits may vary between groups and contracts. Please refer to the appropriate Benefit Booklet, Evidence of Coverage or Subscriber Agreement for applicable surgery benefits/coverage.

BACKGROUND

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is the most common type of irregular heartbeat, affecting at least 2.7 million people in the U.S. Risk of AF has been found to be lower in Black, Hispanic and Asian patients relative to White patients, including following adjustment for demographic and AF risk factors.^{3,4} Stroke is the most serious complication of AF. The estimated incidence of stroke in nontreated patients with AF is 5% per year; despite a lower risk of AF, Black and Hispanic patients have an increased risk of stroke compared with White patients.^{5,6} Stroke associated with AF is primarily embolic, tends to be more severe than the typical ischemic stroke, and causes higher rates of mortality and disability. As a result, stroke prevention is a main goal of AF treatment.

Stroke in AF occurs primarily as a result of thromboembolism from the left atrium. The lack of atrial contractions in AF leads to blood stasis in the left atrium, and this low flow state increases the risk for thrombosis. The area of the left atrium with the lowest blood flow in AF, and, therefore, the highest risk of thrombosis is the left atrial appendage (LAA). It has been estimated that 90% of left atrial thrombi occur in the LAA.

The main treatment for stroke prevention in AF is anticoagulation, which has proven efficacy. The risk for stroke among patients with AF is evaluated using several factors. Two commonly used scores, the CHADS₂ score and the CHA₂DS₂-VASc score are described below in Table 1. Warfarin is the predominant agent in clinical use. A number of newer anticoagulant medications, including dabigatran, rivaroxaban, apixaban, and edoxaban have received U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval for stroke prevention in nonvalvular AF and have demonstrated noninferiority to warfarin in clinical trials. While anticoagulation is effective for stroke prevention, it carries an increased risk of bleeding. Also, warfarin requires frequent monitoring and adjustments as well as lifestyle changes. Newer agents do not require the frequent monitoring seen with warfarin therapy; however, specific reversal agents do not exist for all of these agents. The 2018 American College of Chest Physicians guidelines (updated from 2012) recommend that CHA₂DS₂-VASc be used to evaluate stroke risk, and patients initially identified as having a low stroke risk should not be given antithrombotic therapy. In addition, they recommend bleeding risk assessments be given to every patient at every patient contact and that “potentially modifiable bleeding risk factors” should be the initial focus.

Table 1. CHADS₂ and CHA₂DS₂-VASc Scores to Predict Ischemic Stroke Risk in Patients With Atrial Fibrillation

Letter	Clinical Characteristics	Points Awarded
C	Congestive heart failure (signs/symptoms of heart failure confirmed with objective evidence of cardiac dysfunction)	1
H	Hypertension (resting blood pressure >140/90 mmHg on at least 2 occasions or current antihypertensive pharmacologic treatment)	1
A	Age ≥75 y	2
D	Diabetes (fasting glucose >125 mg/dL or treatment with oral hypoglycemic agent and/or insulin)	1
S	Stroke or transient ischemic attack (includes any history of cerebral ischemia)	2
V	Vascular disease (prior myocardial infarction, peripheral arterial disease, or aortic plaque)	1
A	Age 65-74 y	1
Sc	Sex category of female (female sex confers higher risk)	1

Bleeding is the primary risk associated with systemic anticoagulation. Risk scores have been developed to estimate the risk of significant bleeding in patients treated with systemic anticoagulation, such as the HAS-BLED score, which has been validated to assess the annual risk of significant bleeding in patients with AF treated with warfarin.⁸ The score ranges from 0 to 9, based on clinical characteristics, including the presence of hypertension, renal and liver function, history of stroke, bleeding, labile international normalized ratios, age, and drug/alcohol use. Scores of 3 or greater are considered to be associated with a high risk of bleeding, potentially signaling the need for closer monitoring of patients for adverse risks, closer monitoring of international normalized ratios, or differential dose selections of oral anticoagulants or aspirin.²

Surgical removal, or exclusion, of the LAA is often performed in patients with AF who are undergoing open heart surgery for other reasons. Percutaneous left atrial appendage closure (LAAC) devices have been developed as a nonpharmacologic alternative to anticoagulation for stroke prevention in AF. The devices may prevent stroke by occluding the LAA, thus preventing thrombus formation.

Several versions of LAA occlusion devices have been developed. The PLAATO system (ev3 Endovascular) was the first device to be approved by the FDA for LAA occlusion. The device was discontinued in 2007 for commercial reasons, and intellectual property was sold to manufacturers of the Watchman system. The Watchman Left Atrial Appendage System (Boston Scientific) is a self-expanding nickel titanium device. It has a polyester covering and fixation barbs for attachment to the endocardium. Implantation is performed percutaneously through a catheter delivery system, using venous access and transseptal puncture to enter the left atrium. Transesophageal echocardiography and fluoroscopy are used to guide the procedure. Following implantation, patients receive anticoagulation with warfarin or alternative agents for approximately 1 to 2 months. After this period, patients are maintained on antiplatelet agents (ie, aspirin and/or clopidogrel) indefinitely. The Watchman FLX device is a next-generation Watchman device that is also FDA-approved for LAAC. This device is based on the design of the Watchman device, is fully recapturable and repositionable, and was made to occlude a wider size range of LAA than the original Watchman device.⁹ The Amplatzer cardiac plug (St. Jude Medical), is FDA-approved for closure of atrial septal defects but not for LAAC. A second-generation device developed for the specific indication of LAAC, the Amplatzer Amulet (Abbott), received FDA approval in August 2021.¹⁰ The Amplatzer Amulet consists of a nitinol mesh disc to seal the ostium of the LAA and a nitinol mesh distal lobe, to be positioned within the LAA. The device is preloaded within a delivery sheath. The Percutaneous LAA Transcatheter Occlusion device (ev3) has also been evaluated in research studies but has not received FDA approval. The Occlutech™ (Occlutech) Left Atrial Appendage Occluder has received a CE mark for coverage in Europe. The Cardioblate™ closure device (Medtronic) is currently being tested in clinical studies.

The Lariat Loop Applicator is a suture delivery device approved by the FDA, intended to close a variety of surgical wounds. It is not specifically approved for LAAC. While the Watchman and other devices are implanted in the endocardium, the Lariat is a non-implant epicardial device.

In September 2021, the FDA sent a letter to healthcare providers indicating that women undergoing percutaneous LAA closure may be at higher risk of adverse procedural outcomes than men.¹¹ This was based on an analysis of registry data from 49,357 patients who underwent LAA closure with the Watchman device.¹² When adjusted for multiple confounding factors, the study found women were more likely than men to experience any adverse event, major adverse events, and major bleeding. Women also had a significantly higher risk of death (adjusted odds ratio [OR], 2.01; 95% confidence interval [CI] 1.31 to 3.09) but absolute risk was low for both women and men (0.3% vs. 0.1%). In their letter, the FDA stated that they believe the benefits continue to outweigh the risks for approved LAA closure devices when used in accordance with their instructions for use.

The optimal study design for evaluating the efficacy of percutaneous LAAC for the prevention of stroke in AF is a randomized controlled trial (RCT) that includes clinically relevant measures of health outcomes. The rate of ischemic stroke during follow-up is the primary outcome of interest, along with rates of systemic

embolization, cardiac events, bleeding complications, and death. For the LAAC devices, the appropriate comparison group could be oral anticoagulation, no therapy (for patients who have a prohibitive risk for oral anticoagulation), or open surgical repair.

Ideally, percutaneous LAAC devices would represent an alternative to oral anticoagulation for the prevention of stroke in patients with AF. However, during the postimplantation period the LAAC device may be associated with increased thrombogenicity, therefore, anticoagulation is used during the periprocedural period. Most studies evaluating percutaneous LAAC devices have included patients who are eligible for anticoagulation.

In 2002, the PLAATO system (ev3 Endovascular) was the first device to be approved by the FDA for LAA occlusion. The device was discontinued in 2007 for commercial reasons, and intellectual property was sold to manufacturers of the Watchman system.

In 2015, the Watchman™ Left Atrial Appendage Closure Technology (Boston Scientific) was approved by the FDA through the premarket approval process by the Left Atrial Appendage Versus Warfarin Therapy for Prevention of Stroke in Patients with Atrial Fibrillation randomized controlled trial.¹³ In 2020, the Watchman FLX device (Boston Scientific) was approved by the FDA based on the single-arm, nonrandomized PINNACLE FLX study.⁹ The Amplatzer™ Amulet™ Left Atrial Appendage Occluder (Abbott) received FDA approval in 2021 through the premarket approval process based on results from the Amplatzer Amulet Left Atrial Appendage Occluder Randomized Controlled Trial (Amulet IDE Trial).¹⁰ The Watchman and Amplatzer Amulet devices are indicated to reduce the risk of thromboembolism from the LAA in patients with nonvalvular AF who:

- Are at increased risk for stroke and systemic embolism based on CHADS2 or CHA2DS2-VASc scores and are recommended for anticoagulation therapy;
- Are deemed by their physicians to be suitable for anticoagulation therapy; and
- Have an appropriate rationale to seek a nonpharmacologic alternative to anticoagulation therapy, taking into account the safety and effectiveness of the device compared to anticoagulation therapy.

FDA product code: NGV.

Several other devices are being evaluated for LAA occlusion but are not approved in the U.S. for percutaneous LAAC. In 2006, the Lariat™ Loop Applicator device (SentreHEART), a suture delivery system, was cleared for marketing by the FDA through the 510(k) process. The intended use is to facilitate suture placement and knot tying in surgical applications where soft tissues are being approximated or ligated with a pretied polyester suture. The Amplatzer Cardiac Plug device (St. Jude Medical) and WaveCrest™ (Johnson & Johnson Biosense Webster) have CE approval in Europe for LAAC but are not currently approved in the U.S. for this indication.

CODING

Medicare Advantage Plans

The following code(s) may be allowed as part of a CMS approved clinical study:

33340 Percutaneous transcatheter closure of the left atrial appendage with endocardial implant, including fluoroscopy, transseptal puncture, catheter placement(s), left atrial angiography, left atrial appendage angiography, when performed, and radiological supervision and interpretation

Note: If you are treating a Medicare Advantage Plan member as part of a CMS approved study, please follow the procedures for correct billing and coding of services found in the policy for Clinical Trials Medicare Advantage Plans.

Claims for services rendered as part of a CMS approved clinical study must be billed with an appropriate modifier:

Modifier Q0 – Investigational clinical service provided in a clinical research study that is in an approved research study (Medicare claims filed without the Q0 modifier will deny as not medically necessary)

Modifier Q1 – Routine clinical service provided in a clinical research study that is in an approved clinical research study

Commercial Products

The following code(s) is medically necessary when the criteria above has been met:

33340 Percutaneous transcatheter closure of the left atrial appendage with endocardial implant, including fluoroscopy, transseptal puncture, catheter placement(s), left atrial angiography, left atrial appendage angiography, when performed, and radiological supervision and interpretation

RELATED POLICIES

Clinical Trials Medicare Advantage Plans

Medicare Advantage Plans National and Local Coverage Determinations

Prior Authorization via Web-Based Tool for Procedures

PUBLISHED

Provider Update, October 2022

Provider Update, September 2021

Provider Update, December 2020

Provider Update, August 2019

Provider Update, November 2018

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