

Medicare Advantage Risk Adjustment Program  
**Quick Reference Guide**



# What is Risk Adjustment?

**Risk adjustment is the process by which the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) reimburses Medicare Advantage Plans, such as BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, based on the health status of their members. Risk adjustment was implemented to pay Medicare Advantage Plans more accurately for the predicted health cost expenditures of members by adjusting payments based on demographics (age and gender) as well as health status.**

## History of Risk Adjustment

As a part of risk adjustment implementation, CMS initially collected hospital inpatient diagnoses for determining payment to Medicare Advantage Plans. In 2000, Congress mandated a change to include ambulatory data. This change took place gradually, with full implementation in 2007. CMS selected a payment model that included diagnosis data reported from physician office, hospital inpatient, and hospital outpatient settings, which is part of the CMS-Hierarchical Condition Category (CMS-HCC) payment model.

## Physician's Role

Physician data is critical for accurate risk adjustment. Physicians are the largest source of ambulatory data for the risk adjustment model. CMS-HCC model relies on ICD-10-CM coding specificity.

## How Does Risk Adjustment Impact Physicians and Members?

It is important to keep in mind that the risk adjustment process also benefits you and your patients. How?

Increased coding accuracy helps BlueCross identify patients who may benefit from disease and medical management programs. More accurate health status information can be used to match health care needs with the appropriate level of care.

Risk adjustment helps you meet your CMS provider responsibilities when reporting ICD-10-CM codes, including:

- + Secondary diagnoses, to the highest level of specificity.
- + Maintaining accurate and complete medical records (ICD-10-CM codes must be submitted with proper documentation).
- + Reporting claims and encounter data in a timely manner.

With your help in providing accurate and timely coding for risk adjustment, we can avoid unnecessary and costly administrative revisions, and provide your patients and our members with superior customer service.

**Medicare's payment is based on ICD-10-CM diagnoses codes, not CPT<sup>®</sup> procedural codes.**

## Why is Medical Record Documentation Important for Risk Adjustment?

- + Accurate risk adjusted payment relies on complete medical record documentation and diagnosis coding.
- + CMS conducts risk adjustment data validation by medical record review.
- + Specificity of the ICD-10-CM diagnosis coding is substantiated by the medical record.

## Importance of ICD-10-CM Diagnosis Coding

- + ICD-10-CM is the official diagnosis code set for Medicare, and is used for risk adjusted payment. It is a more robust code set with greater specificity than ICD-9-CM.
- + Medical record documentation dictates what code is assigned.
- + Appropriate coding requires use of the most specific code available.

## Medical Record Documentation

- + Documentation should be clear, concise, consistent, complete and legible.
- + Document coexisting conditions at least annually.
- + Use standard abbreviations.
- + Utilize problem lists (ensuring they are comprehensive, show evaluation and treatment for each condition relating to an ICD-10-CM code on the date of service, and are signed and dated by the physician or physician extender).

- + Identify patient and date on each page of the record.
- + Authenticate the record with signature and credentials.

## The Major Points

Federal regulations require Medicare and its agents to review and validate medical records to avoid underpayments or overpayments.

It is important for the physician's office to fully code each encounter; the claim should report the ICD-10-CM code of every diagnosis that was addressed and should only report codes of diagnoses that were actively addressed.

Contributory (co-morbid) conditions should be reported if they impact the care and are therefore addressed at the visit, but not if the condition is inactive or immaterial. It should be obvious from the medical record entry associated with the claim that all reported diagnoses were addressed and that all diagnoses that were addressed were reported.

## Data Process for Risk Adjustment

- 1 Physician documents member visit in the medical record; the office codes the claim from the medical record.
- 2 BlueCross submits diagnosis data from claims to CMS for risk adjustment calculation and payment.
- 3 CMS conducts annual data validation audit on selected plans.

## Requests for Medical Records

BlueCross continually conducts medical record reviews to identify additional conditions not captured through claims or encounter data and to verify the accuracy of coding.

In addition, if CMS conducts an annual Data Validation Audit on the Medicare Advantage Health Plan, you will be required to assist us by providing medical record documentation for members included in the audit.

If this occurs, medical records can be mailed or faxed to:

BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee  
C/O Verisk Health, Inc.  
10897 South River Front Parkway, Suite 400 T  
South Jordan, UT 84095-9984  
Phone: 877-489-8437 | Fax: 888-226-3395

Upload: [submitrecords.com](https://submitrecords.com) – password: "bcbst87"

## Concerned about HIPAA Privacy?

The collection of risk adjustment data and request for medical records to validate payment made to Medicare Advantage organizations is considered a health care operation and does not violate the privacy provisions of HIPAA (CFR 164.502).

## CMS Data Validation

Data validation helps ensure the integrity and accuracy of risk-adjusted payment. It is the process of verifying that the diagnosis codes submitted by the Medicare Advantage organization are supported by the medical record documentation for a member. Medicare Advantage Plans are selected for data validation audits annually. It is important for physicians and their office staff to be aware of risk adjustment data validation activities because medical record documentation may be requested by the Medicare Advantage organization. As previously stressed, accurate risk-adjusted payment relies on the diagnosis coding derived from the member's medical record.



For more information related to risk adjustment, visit the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services website at **[csscooperations.com](https://csscooperations.com)**.

For more information related to Medicare Advantage, see the BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee Provider Administration Manual at **[bcbst.com/providers/manuals/bcbstPAM.pdf](https://bcbst.com/providers/manuals/bcbstPAM.pdf)**.



BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee  
1 Cameron Hill Circle | Chattanooga, TN 37402  
[bcbstmedicare.com](https://bcbstmedicare.com)

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