

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Nonsurgical Spinal Decompression Therapy

Utilization Management Policy # 473

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What is nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy and what is known about it so far?

Spinal pain is a common problem. Traditional treatments that are helpful for some patients with neck, mid, and low back pain include, physical therapy, manipulation, exercise, and drugs (pain killers, anti-inflammatory drugs, and muscle relaxants). Nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy is a possible alternative treatment for spinal pain.

Nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy is a type of computer-aided motorized traction that has been promoted as being able to reduce the pressure on spinal nerves (decompression), which is something that has not been demonstrated to occur with conventional mechanical traction. There is disagreement about the research that has been used as the reference to support this claim. In part, this is due to the study having evaluated the results of only three subjects.

There is a lack of research concerning the safety of nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy. It is uncertain if this therapy helps more than traditional treatments. Most healthcare organizations exclude nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy from benefit coverage.

How was nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy evaluated?

A work group of clinicians was assigned to review the available research. The internet was searched for policies, guidelines and articles about nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy. The work group independently examined the research using a broadly accepted method. Possible ratings were high, moderate, low, or very low quality.

Before it was approved, the policy was presented to a series of committees that included independent health care practitioners.

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What did the work group find?

The marketing claims made about the benefits and safety of nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy are not supported by research. The research quality was rated as *very low*. It was not possible to make a determination that nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy provided more benefit or less risk, when compared to generally accepted and safe treatments including traditional spinal manipulation. The vast majority of other healthcare companies and governmental agencies appear to have reached similar conclusions.

What were the limitations of the information?

The research on spinal nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy is limited. All of the studies considered suitable for evaluation were of very low quality. Accordingly, any conclusions about the results were uncertain. Only two studies were designed to evaluate the benefits of nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy vs. other treatments. Some of the studies were conducted by individuals with financial interests in the results.

What are the conclusions?

Nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy is viewed as *unproven and not medically necessary*. Further research is needed before nonsurgical spinal decompression therapy can be considered an established treatment option for any spinal conditions.