

## Chief Complaint

Each encounter should appropriately identify a chief complaint (i.e. the main reason the provider is seeing the patient for on that given date of service). There is little guidance outlining the chief complaint being the center focus of the documentation. If you research chief complaint documentation guidelines, you will only find it listed four times. Two out of those four times are headings and one is a parenthetical note. However, the lack of a chief complaint results in documentation that doesn't capture the intent of the visit, which makes it extremely difficult to support the medical necessity for the encounter.

Documentation guidelines state that the chief complaint should be a *concise statement*. A concise statement means that we do not need a lengthy description of the problem, but rather a brief explanation of the reason of the encounter.

The chief complaint should, according to the 1995-1997 E/M guidelines, describe the "symptom, problem, condition, diagnosis, physician recommended return, or other factor that is the reason for the encounter." We are often told that a chief complaint stating "follow-up" is not a valid chief complaint, but it does state in the guidelines that a physician-recommended return is a valid chief complaint. So why the discrepancy? Using just 'follow - up' alone is too vague because we do not know what the follow up is for. Therefore, the appropriate way to indicate a follow-up for the the chief complaint is to include the reason or need for the follow up, e.g. "follow-up for diabetes."

The last reference that we have in the official guidelines is that the documentation should clearly reflect the chief complaint. This means the provider's documentation should indicate that the reason he or she saw the patient on a given date of service matches the listed chief complaint.

While chief complaint is not listed on an auditing grid in a way that impacts the "bean counting process" of auditing a note, it still greatly impacts the overall complexity of the patient encounter.

*This Week's Tip Provided by:*

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