



## Clinical Medical Policy Outpatient Speech Therapy for Members With Special Needs

### **Benefit Coverage:**

Rehabilitative speech services are covered for members with neurodevelopmental disorders when recommended by a medical provider to address a specific condition, deficit, or dysfunction.

A condition of stuttering or stammering which occurs in the absence of a neurodevelopmental disorder, in children or adults, is also subject to review using this policy, and requires prior authorization.

Note: Altered auditory feedback (AAF) devices use audio feedback by means of an earpiece worn in or behind the ear. Altered auditory feedback devices are considered experimental/investigational in the treatment of stuttering and are therefore not covered by Neighborhood. There is currently a lack of evidence in the published medical literature on the effectiveness of these devices.

### **Description:**

Activities of Daily Living are defined as activities related to personal care and include bathing or showering, dressing, getting in or out of bed or a chair, using the toilet, and eating. Age appropriateness of these activities is considered when determining medical necessity. Communication deficits may impact the performance of activities of daily living.

Rehabilitative therapies are treatments for significant functional impairments caused by disease, injury, congenital anomalies or neurodevelopmental disorders that are needed to restore or improve functional capabilities or move a patient towards age appropriate skills and function. They include physical, occupational and speech therapies which are provided by a provider who is licensed/registered, performs within the scope of the professional practice, and provides skilled therapy (including ongoing assessment and progression of a program.)

Speech-language therapy services assist with the development of human communication and evaluate and/or treat speech, language, cognitive-linguistic, feeding, or swallowing impairments related to a specific illness, injury, or congenital or neurodevelopmental condition.

Adaptive Equipment - Therapy may include evaluation and recommendations for adaptive equipment and/or assistive devices to optimize functional outcomes.

Disfluency or Dysfluency – Impairment of the ability to produce smooth, fluent speech.

### **Coverage Determination:**

Speech-language therapy is covered for medically determined, functional impairments of speech, language, cognitive-linguistic skills, feeding, or swallowing that are the result of an underlying medical condition.

When therapy is requested for stuttering or stammering, the expectation is that corrective services be provided by the schools for children whose impairment is impacting their academic requirements. The goal of community based therapy should be to lessen the impact or severity of disfluency when it

occurs. The goal is not so much to eliminate disruptions in fluency-which many people find difficult to do-but to minimize their impact upon communication when they do occur.

An initial evaluation is authorized for speech-language therapy, within Neighborhood's network. To determine authorization for treatment, documentation of initial evaluation by the appropriate therapist and a treatment plan which specifies frequency, duration, and modalities of treatment, must be submitted.

Treatment modalities are expected to be evidence-based and available within the Neighborhood network. The treatment goals must systematically address a specific diagnosis, deficit, or dysfunction for a patient who has a reasonable expectation of achieving measurable improvement in a reasonable and predictable period of time; the services prescribed must be approved by Neighborhood to be effective, reasonable treatment for the patient's diagnosis, deficit, or dysfunction.

Conditions which are considered to be appropriate for behavioral management rather than medical/rehabilitative therapies will be referred appropriately.

Children who are receiving therapies in school may be referred for outpatient evaluation for consideration of supplemental treatments or for treatments during times when school is not in session, when the deficits identified require rehabilitation that is primarily medical in nature and related to activities of daily living as opposed to deficits which are primarily of academic impact and require academic/educational therapy.

Children up to age 3 with developmental delays and related conditions, should be referred to Early Intervention for evaluation and treatment, prior to requesting services from Neighborhood.

Treatment for problems with **Swallowing and Food Aversion** are covered when medically necessary if the swallowing or feeding disorder is the result of an underlying medical condition and the medical necessity of the therapy has been demonstrated by results of appropriate swallowing studies and evaluation by a certified speech language pathologist.

NOTE: Patients should be assessed for the impact of their swallowing/food aversion problems on their weight and nutritional status. If there is evidence of failure to thrive or other medical complications, they should be referred for nutritional and medical consultation.

**Criteria:**

The goals of the criteria in this policy are intended to:

1. Define nature and scope of rehabilitative therapies to provide evidence-based approaches to disabilities and deficits.
2. Describe requirements for evaluation, treatment proposals, documentation, follow -up and assessment of treatments for appropriateness and efficacy.
3. Promote surveillance for and reassessment of newly emerging neurodevelopmental considerations and diagnoses in members who are in treatment.

NOTE: MCAP® criteria is utilized for medical necessity decisions related to requests for outpatient speech therapy for all other conditions.

Evaluation for speech therapy services may be initiated by the child's primary care providers or specialists and should include all of the following:

1. Be linguistically, developmentally, and culturally appropriate,
2. Be performed by a Neighborhood contracted provider/institution experienced with working with special needs clients,
3. Provide verbal and written feedback with results, recommendations, and appropriate referrals provided to parents/guardians,
4. Use age appropriate standardized tests that measure the extent of impairment, performance deviation, and language and pragmatic skills to determine whether the deficits/delays are severe enough to impair academic performance or social communication, and

NOTE: A child who is referred for speech therapy evaluation or treatment should also have an audiologic evaluation.

5. Consideration of all causes of speech delay, including but not limited to co morbid psychiatric disorders, environmental deprivation, pervasive developmental disorders mental retardation, autism, selective mutism, should all be considered in cases of language delay.

Treatment planning and follow up should include all of the following:

1. Provided in writing to the referring practitioner and parent,
2. Reflect the diagnosis/deficits,
3. Reflect evidence based treatment approach stating planned modalities, frequency of treatment, duration of treatment, estimated date or number of treatments when established goals will be achieved,
4. Specify attainable short and long term goals that will be objectively measured,
5. Specify interim assessment strategies,
6. Specific guidelines for the training of the patient and caregiver to perform exercises or treatments at home, and
7. Specific parameters and a timetable for making the transition from skilled services to caregiver/patient provided services.

Additional criteria for speech therapy for stuttering/stammering:

1. Evaluation and assessment includes the impact the disorder has on the person's ability to communicate and participate appropriately in activities of daily living.
2. Information from the evaluation is used to develop a specific treatment program, one that is designed to:
  - lessen the impact or severity of disfluency when it occurs
  - include measures that member can do when disfluency occurs
  - communicate more effectively, and participate more fully in life activities

3. Progress notes demonstrate improvement and compliance with the measures required when disfluency occurs.

Recertification with Neighborhood:

Treatment should be recertified by the referring practitioner at least every 12 visits, or every 3 months, whichever comes first.

1. Recertification for further treatment is based on documentation of appropriateness of therapy, patient progress, adjustment of goals and expectations based on experience with the patient, and projection of frequency and duration of subsequent treatment. In addition, the following criteria must be met, as applicable:
  - a. Neighborhood should be updated if there are changes in the patient's medical status impacting their treatment plan/progress.
  - b. If measurable improvement is made and continued treatment is requested by the therapist, the patient's progress towards identified goals should be clearly documented and the treatment plan updated accordingly.
  - c. Ongoing discharge planning including transition from therapeutic interventions to maintenance strategies delivered by family providers should be documented.

Follow up with referring practitioner is expected:

1. Routine reports must be communicated to referring practitioner after every 12 visits or every 3 months, whichever comes first.
2. Notification to referring practitioner is required if there is poor compliance with appointments or with therapeutic recommendations.
3. Notification to referring practitioner is required if the family or child appear to be coping poorly with the challenges presented by a special needs child.
4. Communication with practitioner required when there are concerns regarding emerging medical/developmental/behavioral issues E.g.: seizures, spells, behavioral deterioration, poor nutrition or hygiene etc., as these may be evidence for co- morbid diagnoses.
5. A developmental reassessment is strongly recommended at least yearly, unless other symptoms emerge which require more urgent medical assessment.

NOTE: Complex congenital or neurodevelopmental conditions often present as "generic" developmental delay and their underlying diagnosis often does not become clear until the response to therapy as well as the member's progress along his/her expected developmental trajectory has been observed. Additionally, other defining symptoms such as seizures, neuromuscular delay etc. may emerge with time. Therefore, in order to provide optimum care and diagnostic/therapeutic surveillance, members who are receiving therapies for neurodevelopmental/behavioral issues should periodically be reassessed by their referring practitioners or by a neurodevelopmental/neurological consultant to review their

developmental status, to reconsider emerging underlying neurodevelopmental concerns and revisit diagnostic possibilities.

Discharge and Reassessment:

Maintenance begins when the stated therapeutic goals of a treatment plan have been achieved and/or when no further functional progress is apparent or expected to occur.

A maintenance program to be delivered by the child and/or family/caretakers should be documented. One or more of the following criteria are utilized to determine when the child should be discharged from services:

1. When the anticipated goals or expected outcomes for the child have been achieved.
2. The child is unable to continue to progress toward goals.
3. When the therapist or practitioner determines that the child will no longer benefit from the therapy.
4. When the child and family or care takers have documented their ability to effectively carry out a home maintenance program
5. Maintenance program may include a scheduled follow up visit with the treating therapist no sooner than 3 months after discharge/transition of care to family or caretaker.

Criteria for consideration for follow-up visits by a skilled therapist – one or more of the following are required:

1. To monitor the patient's progress in their home regimen.
2. Assess need for further intensive services to increase the rate or scope of the child's progress.
3. Concern by child's medical practitioner that child is not achieving goals.

**Exclusions:**

Speech services that are generally not covered include:

1. Therapy for a condition when the therapeutic goals of a treatment plan have been achieved and no progress is apparent or expected to occur
2. Therapy performed in group settings
3. Non skilled services, including treatments that do not require the skills of a qualified provider or procedures that may be carried out effectively by the child, family or caregivers
4. Maintenance programs, including drills, techniques and exercise that preserve the child's present level of function and prevent regression of that function.
5. Swallowing/feeding therapy for food aversions or food selectivity which are not resultant from an underlying medical condition or neurodevelopmental disorder are not covered by the medical plan. If needed, behavioral therapy may be used to treat this condition. Such patients may be referred for mental health services if appropriate.

6. Oral sensorimotor therapy or myofunctional therapy is not covered as isolated therapy for the treatment of tongue thrust, deviant or reverse swallow or oral myofunctional disorders in members who do not have a diagnosed neuromuscular disease.
7. Vocational rehabilitation, testing and screening focusing on job adaptability, job placement.
8. Rehabilitative services to restore function for a member's specific occupation.
9. Services provided solely for the convenience of the member or service provider.
10. Services associated with use of Altered Auditory Feedback (AAF) devices, including the devices.

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***References:***

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American Medical Association CPT Manual (2007)  
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American Occupational Therapy Association (2004)  
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The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) established the *Preferred Practice Patterns for the Profession of Speech-Language Pathology*

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