

Medical Treatment Guidelines

Washington State Department of Labor and Industries

Work-Related Proximal Median Nerve Entrapment (PMNE)

Diagnosis and Treatment

Table of Contents

- I. [Introduction](#)
- II. [Establishing Work-Relatedness](#)
- III. [Making the Diagnosis](#)
 - A. [Symptoms and Signs](#)
 - B. [Electrodiagnostic Testing](#)
 - C. [Other Diagnostic Tests](#)
- IV. [Treatment](#)
 - A. [Conservative Treatment](#)
 - B. [Surgical Treatment](#)
- V. [Return to Work \(RTW\)](#)
 - A. [Early Assessment](#)
 - B. [Returning to Work following Surgery](#)
- VI. [Electrodiagnostic Worksheet](#)
- VII. [Guideline Summary](#)

Work-Related Proximal Median Nerve Entrapment (PMNE)

Diagnosis and Treatment

I. INTRODUCTION

This guideline is to be used by physicians, claim managers, and utilization review staff. The emphasis is on accurate diagnosis and treatment that is curative or rehabilitative (see WAC 296-20-01002 for definitions). An electrodiagnostic worksheet and guideline summary are appended to the end of this document.

This guideline was developed in 2009 by Washington State's Labor and Industries' Industrial Insurance Medical Advisory Committee (IIMAC) and its subcommittee on Upper Extremity Entrapment Neuropathies. It focuses on work-related medical conditions. One of the subcommittee's goals is to provide standards that ensure a uniformly high quality of care for injured workers in Washington State.

The subcommittee is comprised of a group of physicians of various medical specialties, including rehabilitation medicine, occupational medicine, orthopaedic surgery, plastic surgery, neurosurgery, neurology, pain medicine, and electrodiagnostic medicine. The subcommittee based its recommendations on the weight of the best available clinical and scientific evidence from a systematic review of the literature. PMNE is a rare entrapment neuropathy and there are no high quality clinical or scientific studies regarding this condition. Nonetheless, the subcommittee's consensus opinion is that objective confirmation of the PMNE diagnosis is critical to making the correct diagnosis and directing appropriate treatment.

The subcommittee unanimously approved this guideline.

Compression near the antecubital fossa can occur as the nerve traverses any of the following anatomic structures: the ligament of Struthers/supracondylar process, the lacertus fibrosis (bicipital aponeurosis), the fascia of the pronator teres, or the fibrous arch formed by fascia of the flexor digitorum superficialis. Entrapment of the median nerve in the proximal forearm must be distinguished from more distal sites of entrapment such as at the wrist (carpal tunnel) or at the anterior interosseous nerve branch (which supplies no cutaneous sensation).

In general, both work-relatedness and appropriate symptoms and signs must be present to accept proximal median nerve entrapment on a claim. Electrodiagnostic studies (EDS), including nerve conduction velocity studies (NCVs) and needle electromyography (EMG), should be scheduled immediately to corroborate the clinical diagnosis. Completion of EDS is required if time loss extends beyond two weeks or if surgery is requested.

II. ESTABLISHING WORK-RELATEDNESS

Work related activities may cause or contribute to the development of PMNE. Establishing work-relatedness requires all of the following:

1. Exposure: Workplace activities that contribute to or cause PMNE, and
2. Outcome: A diagnosis of PMNE that meets the diagnostic criteria under Section III, and
3. Relationship: Generally accepted scientific evidence, which establishes on a more probable than not basis (greater than 50%) that the workplace activities (exposure) in an individual case contributed to the development or worsening of the condition (outcome).

When the Department receives notification of an occupational disease, the [Occupational Disease & Employment History](#) form is mailed to the worker, employer or attending provider. The form should be completed and returned to the insurer as soon as possible. If the worker's attending provider completes the form, provides a detailed history in the chart note, and gives an opinion on causality, he or she may be paid for this (use billing code 1055M). Additional billing information is available in the [Attending Doctor's Handbook](#).

Work-related PMNE is most often associated with activities requiring extensive, repetitive, forceful, or prolonged use of the elbow or forearm. Usually, one or more of the following work exposures occurs on a regular basis¹⁻⁴:

This is not an exhaustive list and is meant only as a guide in the consideration of work-relatedness.

Heavy labor	Using vibrating hand tools
Repetitive grasping	Prolonged hammering
Lifting, carrying, placing heavy objects	Scraping dishes
Packaging motions	Ladling food

The types of jobs most mentioned in the literature or reported in L&I's data as being associated with PMNE are listed below⁵⁻⁸:

Assembly line worker	Cashier
Carpenter	Cook
Mechanic	Server
Woodworker	Barber
Concrete worker	Dentist
Shoveller	Nurse
Clerk	Milker

III. MAKING THE DIAGNOSIS

A. SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS

Our case definition of confirmed PMNE includes appropriate symptoms, objective physical findings ("signs"), and abnormal electrodiagnostic studies. A provisional diagnosis of PMNE may be made based upon appropriate symptoms and objective signs, alone, but confirmation of the diagnosis requires abnormal EDS. Non-surgical therapy may be considered in cases in which a provisional diagnosis has been made. Surgical treatment should be provided only in cases where the diagnosis of PMNE has been confirmed by abnormal EDS as the potential benefits of PMNE surgery outweigh the risks to which patients are exposed during such surgery only when the diagnosis of PMNE has been confirmed by abnormal EDS.

The **primary symptom** associated with PMNE is pain in the proximal volar area of the forearm. Many patients report an increase in pain severity with an increase in activity. Other symptoms may include weakness in the forearm and the hand (such as a decrease in grip strength), cramping in the hand (writer's cramp), and paresthesia or numbness in the first three digits.^{1,3,9-12} Nocturnal symptoms are not as common for PMNE as they are for carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS).

Physical signs include tenderness in the forearm over the pronator teres muscle and along the median nerve distribution. Unlike median entrapment at the carpal tunnel, if weakness is present, it should

involve muscles supplied by the median nerve both above and below the wrist. Tinel's sign (paresthesias radiating in a median nerve distribution with pressure or tapping over the median nerve in the forearm) may be present, but by itself is not specifically diagnostic of PMNE. A positive Phalen's sign (paresthesias radiating in a median nerve distribution with sustained flexion of the wrist) or Tinel's sign with tapping over the wrist more likely indicates CTS rather than PMNE.

Three provocative tests have been described to help corroborate the site of compression for PMNE. These provocative tests do not replace the objective signs discussed below. Sensitivity and specificity of these provocative tests have not been established. The tests are based on creating maximal tension on the anatomical sites that can contribute to PMNE:

1. The pronator teres muscle is implicated if symptoms are reproduced upon resisted pronation of the forearm in neutral position with the elbow extended.
2. The lacertus fibrosis (bicipital aponeurosis) is implicated if symptoms are reproduced upon resisted elbow flexion at 120-130 degrees flexion with the forearm in maximal supination.
3. The flexor digitorum superficialis is implicated if symptoms are reproduced upon resisted flexion of the proximal interphalangeal joint to the long finger ("middle finger flexion test").¹¹⁻¹³

Every effort should be made to objectively verify the diagnosis of PMNE before considering surgery. One potentially competing diagnosis is a non-traumatic inflammatory neuritis, Parsonage-Turner Syndrome, which may produce dysfunction in a median nerve distribution that can mimic PMNE. This condition often produces more widespread abnormalities affecting multiple upper extremity nerves. Also, it is usually accompanied by proximal pain around the shoulder girdle, rather than in the forearm. This condition usually improves spontaneously in six to twelve months. This idiopathic condition would not normally be considered a work-related condition.

B. ELECTRODIAGNOSTIC STUDIES (EDS)

Electrodiagnostic studies (NCVs and EMG) are required to objectively confirm the diagnosis of PMNE. EDS are useful both to diagnose PMNE and to rule out other potential sites of median nerve compression, such as CTS. Unlike the distal median nerve entrapment within the carpal tunnel, NCVs in proximal median nerve entrapment are often normal.^{1,2,9} Short segment nerve conduction studies have not been demonstrated to reliably diagnose this entity. However, EMG studies may show an abnormality in the distribution of the proximal median nerve of the forearm. The diagnosis is specifically confirmed by EMG demonstrating membrane instability (e.g. increased insertional activity, fibrillation potentials, positive sharp waves) of median innervated muscles both below and above the wrist in the forearm (unlike CTS which should only affect median innervated muscles below the wrist).¹⁰

C. OTHER DIAGNOSTIC TESTS

There is no documented role for MRI in the diagnosis of PMNE.

IV. TREATMENT

A. CONSERVATIVE TREATMENT

Conservative treatment for PMNE has been described only in narrative reviews, case reports, and retrospective case series. Examples include rest, modification of activities that exacerbate symptoms, splinting at wrist and elbow, physical therapy, anti-inflammatory drug therapy, and corticosteroid injections.^{2,6,9,11,12,14} Patients do not usually need time off from work activities prior to surgery unless they present with objective weakness or sensory loss in the distribution of the proximal median nerve that limits work activities or poses a substantial safety risk.

B. SURGICAL TREATMENT

Without confirmation of nerve compression **by both objective clinical findings and abnormal EDS**, surgery will not be authorized.

Surgical treatment for PMNE has been described only in narrative reviews, case reports, and retrospective case series. Surgical treatment should only be considered if the condition does not improve despite conservative treatment, or if the condition interferes with work or activities of daily living. Surgical treatment is only indicated in patients who have appropriate symptoms and one or more of the objective clinical findings described above in addition to abnormal EDS. Surgery should include exploration of the median nerve throughout its proximal course and release of all compressive structures, which may include the ligament of Struthers (if it is present), the lacertus fibrosis (bicipital aponeurosis), the fascia of the pronator teres (PT), and the fascia of the flexor digitorum superficialis (FDS).^{15, 16} Although complete release may require nerve decompression at multiple sites, this is considered a single procedure.*

In rare cases with long standing motor palsy of part or all of the median nerve, tendon transfers may be considered to hasten return to function. When a complete palsy has been present for one or more muscles for three or more months, the patient and the surgeon should consider the options for tendon transfers. In patients who have already had a decompression of the proximal median nerve six months or more previously with incomplete return of motor function, repeat EDS are recommended. If the EDS show no improvement or worse neurologic function, a re-exploration may be necessary.

Patients with PMNE rarely present with prominent sensory symptoms. For patients with a preoperative loss of sensation who do not have recovery of sensation six months or more after surgical treatment, repeat EDS are recommended. If the EDS show no improvement or worse neurologic function, a re-exploration may be necessary.

*CPT 64708- Neuroplasty, major peripheral nerve, arm or leg, should be billed once for the entire surgical procedure. "Neuroplasty is the decompression or freeing of intact nerve from scar tissue, including external neurolysis and/or transposition. External neurolysis is used to evaluate the nerve to determine if segmental nerve resection and suture are indicated and to enhance regeneration when resection and/or suture are not performed. External neurolysis includes division of perineural adhesions and/or excision of perineural scar tissue." (CPT® code and description and CPT® Assistant Archives 1990-2007, © 2008, American Medical Association)

V. RETURN TO WORK (RTW)

A. EARLY ASSESSMENT

Among workers with upper extremity disorders, 7% of workers account for 75% of the long-term disability.¹⁷ A large prospective study in the Washington State workers' compensation system identified several important predictors of long-term disability: low expectations of return to work (RTW), no offer of a job accommodation, and high physical demands on the job.¹⁸ Identifying and attending to these risk factors when patients have not returned to work within 2-3 weeks of the initial clinical presentation may improve their chances of RTW.

Timeliness of the diagnosis can be a critical factor influencing RTW. Washington State workers diagnosed accurately and early were far more likely to RTW than workers whose condition was diagnosed weeks or months later. Early coordination of care with improved timeliness and effective communication with the workplace is also likely to help prevent long-term disability.

A recent quality improvement project in Washington State has demonstrated that organized delivery of occupational health best practices similar to those listed in Table 1 can substantially prevent long-term disability. Findings can be viewed at:
<http://www.lni.wa.gov/ClaimsIns/Files/Providers/ohs/CohSummaryFindings1207.pdf> .

See next page for Table 1

Table 1. Occupational Health Quality Indicators for Proximal Median Nerve Entrapment

Clinical care action	Time-frame*
1. Identify physical stressors from both work and non-work activities; 2. Screen for presence of PMNE 3. Determine work-relatedness 4. Recommend ergonomic improvements	1 st health care visit
Communicate with employer regarding RTW using 1. Activity Prescription Form (or comparable RTW form) and/or 2. Phone call to employer	Each visit while work restrictions exist
1. Assess impediments for RTW 2. Request specialist consultation	If > 2 weeks of time-loss occurs or if there is no clinical improvement within 6 weeks
Specialist consultation	Performed ASAP, within 3 weeks of request
Electrodiagnostic studies	If the diagnosis of PMNE is being considered, schedule studies immediately. These tests are required if time-loss extends beyond 2 weeks, or if surgery is requested.
Surgical decompression	Performed ASAP, within 4 weeks of determining need for surgery

*“Time-frame” is anchored in time from 1st provider visit related to PMNE complaints.

B. RETURNING TO WORK FOLLOWING SURGERY

Most patients requiring a PMNE release alone can return to light duty work in approximately 3 weeks and regular duty work in approximately 6 weeks. A course of hand therapy may help functional recovery and is particularly important for patients requiring tendon transfers or for patients with residual weakness. These patients may return to light duty work in approximately 6-8 weeks and regular duty work in approximately 10-12 weeks.

VI. ELECTRODIAGNOSTIC WORKSHEET

PURPOSE AND INSTRUCTIONS

The purpose of this worksheet is to help medical and nursing staff interpret electrodiagnostic studies (EDS) that are done for injured workers. The worksheet should be used only when the main purpose of the study is to evaluate a patient for PMNE. It should accompany but not replace the detailed report normally submitted to the insurer. We encourage you to use the electrodiagnostic worksheet below to report EMG results, but we will accept the results on a report generated by your office system.

Worksheet for Proximal Median Nerve Electromyography

Electromyography criteria that confirm the diagnosis of PMNE include evidence of denervation (e.g. increased insertional activity, fibrillation potentials, positive sharp waves) in the following:	Abnormal muscles
1. A muscle supported by the anterior interosseous nerve (flexor pollicis longus, pronator quadratus, or radial aspect of the flexor digitorum profundus)	
OR	
2. A median innervated muscle in the forearm (pronator teres, flexor carpi radialis, flexor digitorum superficialis)	
AND	
3. A median innervated muscle in the hand (abductor pollicis brevis, flexor pollicis brevis, or opponens pollicis)	
AND	
4. Needle EMG of at least one muscle supplied by the ulnar or radial nerve should be normal.	

*A pure AIN syndrome would only need to meet criteria 1 and 4.

Claim Number: _____

Claimant Name: _____

Additional Comments:

Signed

Date

VII. GUIDELINE SUMMARY

Review Criteria for the Diagnosis and Treatment of Proximal Median Nerve Entrapment (PMNE)				
Various treatments have been described in narrative reviews, case reports, and retrospective case series:				
CONSERVATIVE TREATMENT	SURGICAL TREATMENT	CLINICAL FINDINGS		
		SUBJECTIVE	OBJECTIVE	DIAGNOSTIC
Rest Modified activities Splinting at wrist and elbow Physical therapy Anti-inflammatory drug therapy Corticosteroid injections	<p>Surgical treatment should be considered if the condition does not improve despite conservative treatment, or if the condition interferes with work or activities of daily living.</p> <p>Surgical treatment is only indicated in patients who have appropriate symptoms and one or more objective clinical findings in addition to abnormal EDS.</p> <p>Surgery should include exploration of the median nerve throughout its proximal course, and release of all compressive structures, which may include the ligament of Struthers (if present), the lacertus fibrosis, the fascia of the pronator teres, and the fascia of the flexor digitorum superficialis.</p>	<p>Pain in the proximal volar area of the forearm (pain may be exacerbated with increased physical activity).</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Paresthesias in the first 3 digits (median distribution) of the affected arm.</p>	<p>AND</p> <p>Tenderness to palpation over pronator teres muscle.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Weakness of deep flexor muscles supplied by the proximal median nerve [pronator teres, flexor carpi radialis, flexor digitorum superficialis, flexor digitorum profundus (radial half), flexor pollicis longus, pronator quadratus] as well as the muscles supplied by the distal median nerve (abductor pollicis brevis, flexor pollicis brevis, opponens pollicis).</p>	<p>AND</p> <p>EDS (NCVs and EMG) are required to objectively confirm the diagnosis of PMNE. EDS are useful both to diagnose PMNE and to rule out other potential sites of median nerve compression, such as CTS.</p> <p><u>EMG criteria are as follows:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of denervation in a muscle supported by the anterior interosseous nerve (flexor pollicis longus, pronator quadratus, or radial aspect of the flexor digitorum profundus). <p>OR</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of denervation in a median innervated muscle in the forearm (pronator teres, flexor carpi radialis, flexor digitorum superficialis). <p>AND</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of denervation in a median innervated muscle in the hand (abductor pollicis brevis, flexor pollicis brevis, opponens pollicis). <p>AND</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Needle EMG of at least one muscle supplied by the ulnar or radial nerve should be normal <p>A pure AIN syndrome would only need to meet criteria 1 and 4.</p>

References

1. Olehnik WK, Manske PR, Szerzinski J. Median nerve compression in the proximal forearm. *J Hand Surg [Am]* 1994;19(1):121-6.
2. Hartz CR, Linscheid RL, Gramse RR, Daube JR. The pronator teres syndrome: compressive neuropathy of the median nerve. *J Bone Joint Surg Am* 1981;63(6):885-90.
3. Eversmann WW. Proximal Median Nerve Compression. *Hand Clin* 1992;8(2):307-315.
4. Lee MJ, LaStayo PC. Pronator syndrome and other nerve compressions that mimic carpal tunnel syndrome. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther* 2004;34(10):601-9.
5. Lacey SH, Soldatis JJ. Bilateral pronator syndrome associated with anomalous heads of the pronator teres muscle: a case report. *J Hand Surg [Am]* 1993;18(2):349-51.
6. Morris HH, Peters BH. Pronator syndrome: clinical and electrophysiological features in seven cases. *J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry* 1976;39(5):461-4.
7. Stal M, Hagert CG, Englund JE. Pronator syndrome: a retrospective study of median nerve entrapment at the elbow in female machine milkers. *J Agric Saf Health* 2004;10(4):247-56.
8. Wiggins CE. Pronator syndrome. *South Med J* 1982;75(2):240-1.
9. Bridgeman C, Naidu S, Kothari MJ. Clinical and electrophysiological presentation of pronator syndrome. *Electromyogr Clin Neurophysiol* 2007;47(2):89-92.
10. Gross PT, Jones HR, Jr. Proximal median neuropathies: electromyographic and clinical correlation. *Muscle Nerve* 1992;15(3):390-5.
11. Johnson RK, Spinner M, Shrewsbury MM. Median nerve entrapment syndrome in the proximal forearm. *J Hand Surg [Am]* 1979;4(1):48-51.
12. Rehak DC. Pronator syndrome. *Clin Sports Med* 2001;20(3):531-40.
13. Mysiew WJ, Colachis SC, 3rd. The pronator syndrome. An evaluation of dynamic maneuvers for improving electrodiagnostic sensitivity. *Am J Phys Med Rehabil* 1991;70(5):274-7.
14. Mujadzic M, Papanicolaou G, Young H, Tsai TM. Simultaneous surgical release of ipsilateral pronator teres and carpal tunnel syndromes. *Plast Reconstr Surg* 2007;119(7):2141-7.
15. Trumble TE, Budoff JE. and American Society for Surgery of the Hand. (2007). *Hand surgery update IV*. Rosemont, Ill.: American Society for Surgery of the Hand.
16. Trumble T, Sailer SM, Gilbert MM. (2000). *Principles of hand surgery and therapy*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders.

17. Hashemi L, Webster BS, Clance EA, Courtney TK. Length of disability and cost of work-related musculoskeletal disorders of the upper extremity. *J Occup Environ Med* 1998;40:261-269.
18. Turner JA, Franklin G, Fulton-Kehoe D. Early predictors of chronic work disability associated with carpal tunnel syndrome: a longitudinal workers' compensation cohort study. *Am J Ind Med* 2007;50:489-500.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement and gratitude go to all subcommittee members, clinical experts, and consultants who contributed to this important guideline:

IIMAC Committee Members

Gregory T. Carter MD MS
Dianna Chamblin MD – Chair
G.A. DeAndrea MD MBA
Jordan Firestone, MD PhD MPH
Andrew Friedman MD

Subcommittee Clinical Experts

Christopher H. Allan MD
Douglas P. Hanel MD
Michel Kliot MD
Lawrence R. Robinson MD
Thomas E. Trumble MD
Nicholas B. Vedder MD
Michael D. Weiss MD

Consultants:

Terrell Kjerulf MD
Ken O'Bara MD
Eric M. Wall MD MPH

Department staff who helped develop and prepare this guideline include:

Gary M. Franklin MD, MPH, Medical Director
Lee Glass MD, JD, Associate Medical Director
Simone P. Javaher BSN, MPA, Occupational Nurse Consultant
Reshma N. Kearney MPH, Epidemiologist