Preauthorization is required and must be obtained through Case Management.

The following Protocol contains medical necessity criteria that apply for this service. The criteria are also applicable to services provided in the local Medicare Advantage operating area for those members, unless separate Medicare Advantage criteria are indicated. If the criteria are not met, reimbursement will be denied and the patient cannot be billed. Please note that payment for covered services is subject to eligibility and the limitations noted in the patient’s contract at the time the services are rendered.

Description

Liver transplantation is currently performed routinely as a treatment of last resort for patients with end-stage liver disease. Liver transplantation may be performed with liver donation after brain or cardiac death or with a liver segment donation from a living donor. Patients are prioritized for transplant by mortality risk and severity of illness criteria developed by the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network (OPTN) and the United Network of Organ Sharing (UNOS). The severity of illness is determined by the model for end-stage liver disease (MELD) and pediatric end-stage liver disease (PELD) scores.

Summary of Evidence

Liver transplant is an accepted treatment of end-stage liver disease that provides a survival benefit in appropriately selected patients and thus, may be considered medically necessary for the indications listed in the policy statement and in those otherwise meeting United Network of Organ Sharing (UNOS) criteria. Liver transplantation is investigational in patients in whom the procedure is expected to be futile due to comorbid disease or in whom post-transplantation care is expected to significantly worsen comorbid conditions. Case series and case-control data indicate that HIV infection is not an absolute contraindication to liver transplant; for patients who meet selection criteria, these studies have demonstrated patient and graft survival rates are similar to those in the general population of kidney transplant recipients.

Recent literature continues to address expanded criteria for transplantation for hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), predictors of recurrence, the role of neoadjuvant therapy in patients with HCC, expanded donor criteria, transplantation and retransplantation for hepatitis C, and living donor transplantation. Further study is needed before liver transplant selection criteria can be expanded for HCC. Additionally, further study is needed to address salvage liver transplantation for HCC recurrence after primary liver resection.

Liver transplantation for hilar cholangiocarcinoma is performed at some transplant centers, and long-term survival has been reported in select patients with unresectable disease. For metastatic neuroendocrine tumors (NETs), cure of disease is not achieved, and five-year survival is generally not high. However, there have been reports of survival benefit in patients receiving liver transplantation for unresectable NET metastasis confined to the liver. Based on survival data and clinical vetting input, transplantation in patients with hilar cholangiocarcinoma who meet strict eligibility criteria may be considered medically necessary; transplantation for NET metastatic to the liver is considered investigational.
The literature on liver transplantation for pediatric hepatoblastoma is limited, but case series have demonstrated good outcomes and high rates of long-term survival. Additionally, nonmetastatic pediatric hepatoblastoma is included in UNOS criteria for patients eligible for liver transplantation. Therefore, liver transplantation for nonmetastatic pediatric hepatoblastoma may be considered medically necessary.

Case series have demonstrated favorable outcomes with liver retransplantation in certain populations, such as when criteria for an original liver transplantation are met for retransplantation. While some evidence suggests outcomes after retransplantation may be less favorable than for initial transplantation in some patients, long-term survival benefits have been demonstrated. There was support from clinical vetting for retransplantation following primary graft nonfunction, hepatic artery thrombosis, ischemic biliary injury after donation after cardiac death, chronic rejection or certain recurrent nonneoplastic diseases resulting in end-stage liver failure in a primary transplant. As a result, retransplantation after initial failed liver transplant may be considered medically necessary in these situations.

Policy

A liver transplant using a cadaver or living donor may be considered medically necessary for carefully selected patients with end-stage liver failure due to irreversibly damaged livers.

Etiologies of end-stage liver disease include, but are not limited to, the following:

A. Hepatocellular diseases
   - Alcoholic liver disease
   - Viral hepatitis (either A, B, C, or non-A, non-B)
   - Autoimmune hepatitis
   - Alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency
   - Hemochromatosis
   - Non-alcoholic steatohepatitis
   - Protoporphyria
   - Wilson’s disease

B. Cholestatic liver diseases
   - Primary biliary cirrhosis
   - Primary sclerosing cholangitis with development of secondary biliary cirrhosis
   - Biliary atresia

C. Vascular disease
   - Budd-Chiari syndrome

D. Primary hepatocellular carcinoma*

E. Inborn errors of metabolism

F. Trauma and toxic reactions

G. Miscellaneous
   - Familial amyloid polyneuropathy
Liver transplantation may be considered *medically necessary* in patients with polycystic disease of the liver who have massive hepatomegaly causing obstruction or functional impairment.

Liver transplantation may be considered *medically necessary* in patients with unresectable hilar cholangiocarcinoma*.

Liver transplantation may be considered *medically necessary* in pediatric patients with non-metastatic hepatoblastoma.

Liver *retransplantation* may be considered *medically necessary* in patients with:

- primary graft non-function
- hepatic artery thrombosis
- chronic rejection
- ischemic type biliary lesions after donation after cardiac death
- recurrent nonneoplastic disease causing late graft failure.

Liver transplantation is considered *investigational* in the following situations:

- Patients with intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma
- Patients with neuroendocrine tumors metastatic to the liver.

Liver transplantation is considered *not medically necessary* in the following patients:

- Patients with hepatocellular carcinoma that has extended beyond the liver*
- Patients with ongoing alcohol and/or drug abuse. (Evidence for abstinence may vary among liver transplant programs, but generally a minimum of three months is required.)

Liver transplantation is considered *investigational* in all other situations not described above.

*See Policy Guidelines for patient selection criteria.

**Policy Guidelines**

Individual transplant facilities may have their own *additional* requirements or protocols that must be met in order for the patient to be eligible for a transplant at their facility.

**General**

Potential contraindications subject to the judgment of the transplant center:

1. Known current malignancy, including metastatic cancer
2. Recent malignancy with high risk of recurrence
3. Untreated systemic infection making immunosuppression unsafe, including chronic infection
4. Other irreversible end-stage disease not attributed to liver disease
5. History of cancer with a moderate risk of recurrence
6. Systemic disease that could be exacerbated by immunosuppression
7. Psychosocial conditions or chemical dependency affecting ability to adhere to therapy.
Liver Specific Patient Selection Criteria

The MELD and PELD scores range from six (less ill) to 40 (gravely ill). The MELD and PELD scores will change during the course of a patient’s tenure on the waiting list.

Patients with liver disease related to alcohol or drug abuse must be actively involved in a substance abuse treatment program.

Patients with polycystic disease of the liver do not develop liver failure but may require transplantation due to the anatomic complications of a hugely enlarged liver. The MELD/PELD score may not apply to these cases. One of the following complications should be present:

- Enlargement of liver impinging on respiratory function
- Extremely painful enlargement of liver
- Enlargement of liver significantly compressing and interfering with function of other abdominal organs.

Patients with familial amyloid polyneuropathy do not experience liver disease, per se, but develop polyneuropathy and cardiac amyloidosis due to the production of a variant transthyretin molecule by the liver. MELD/PELD exception criteria and scores may apply to these cases. Candidacy for liver transplant is an individual consideration based on the morbidity of the polyneuropathy. Many patients may not be candidates for liver transplant alone due to coexisting cardiac disease.

Criteria used for patient selection of hepatocellular carcinoma patients eligible for liver transplant include the Milan criteria, which is considered the criterion standard, the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) expanded criteria, and UNOS criteria.

**Milan criteria:** a single tumor 5 cm or less in diameter or two to three tumors 3 cm or less

**UCSF expanded criteria:** a single tumor 6.5 cm or less or up to three tumors 4.5 cm or less, and a total tumor size of 8 cm or less

**UNOS T2 criteria:** a single tumor 1 cm or greater and up to 5 cm or less diameter or two to three tumors 1 cm or greater and up to 3 cm or less and without extrahepatic spread or macrovascular invasion. UNOS criteria, which were updated in 2013, may prioritize T2 HCC that meet specified staging and imaging criteria by allocating additional points equivalent to a MELD score predicting a 15% probability of death within three months.

Patients with HCC are appropriate candidates for liver transplant only if the disease remains confined to the liver. Therefore, the patient should be periodically monitored while on the waiting list, and if metastatic disease develops, the patient should be removed from the transplant waiting list. In addition, at the time of transplant a backup candidate should be scheduled. If locally extensive or metastatic cancer is discovered at the time of exploration prior to hepatectomy, the transplant should be aborted, and the backup candidate scheduled for transplant.

Note that liver transplantation for those with T3 HCC is not prohibited by UNOS guidelines, but these patients do not receive any priority on the waiting list. All patients with HCC awaiting transplantation are reassessed at three-month intervals. Those whose tumors have progressed and are no longer T2 tumors will lose the additional allocation points.

Additionally, nodules identified through imaging of cirrhotic livers are given a Class 5 designation. Class 5B and 5T nodules are eligible for automatic priority. Class 5B criteria consist of a single nodule 2 cm or larger and up to 5 cm (T2 stage) that meets specified imaging criteria. Class 5T nodules have undergone subsequent loco-regional treatment after being automatically approved upon initial application or extension. A single Class 5A nodule (greater than 1 cm and less than 2 cm) corresponds to T1 HCC and does not qualify for automatic priority. However, combinations of Class 5A nodules are eligible for automatic priority if they meet stage T2 criteria.
5X lesions are outside of stage T2 and are not eligible for automatic exception points. Nodules less than 1 cm are considered indeterminate and are not considered for additional priority. Therefore, the UNOS allocation system provides strong incentives to use locoregional therapies to downsize tumors to T2 status and to prevent progression while on the waiting list.

**Cholangiocarcinoma**

According to the OPTN policy on liver allocation, candidates with cholangiocarcinoma (CCA) meeting the following criteria will be eligible for a MELD/PELD exception with a 10% mortality equivalent increase every three months:

- Centers must submit a written protocol for patient care to the OPTN/UNOS Liver and Intestinal Organ Transplantation Committee before requesting a MELD score exception for a candidate with CCA. This protocol should include selection criteria, administration of neoadjuvant therapy before transplantation, and operative staging to exclude patients with regional hepatic lymph node metastases, intrahepatic metastases, and/or extrahepatic disease. The protocol should include data collection as deemed necessary by the OPTN/UNOS Liver and Intestinal Organ Transplantation Committee.

- Candidates must satisfy diagnostic criteria for hilar CCA: malignant-appearing stricture on cholangiography and one of the following: carbohydrate antigen 19-9 100 U/mL, or and biopsy or cytology results demonstrating malignancy, or aneuploidy. The tumor should be considered unresectable on the basis of technical considerations or underlying liver disease (e.g., primary sclerosing cholangitis).

- If cross-sectional imaging studies (computed tomography [CT] scan, ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging [MRI]) demonstrate a mass, the mass should be 3 cm or less.

- Intra- and extrahepatic metastases should be excluded by cross-sectional imaging studies of the chest and abdomen at the time of initial exception and every three months before score increases.

- Regional hepatic lymph node involvement and peritoneal metastases should be assessed by operative staging after completion of neoadjuvant therapy and before liver transplantation. Endoscopic ultrasound-guided aspiration of regional hepatic lymph nodes may be advisable to exclude patients with obvious metastases before neoadjuvant therapy is initiated.

- Transperitoneal aspiration or biopsy of the primary tumor (either by endoscopic ultrasound, operative, or percutaneous approaches) should be avoided because of the high risk of tumor seeding associated with these procedures.

**Donor Criteria – Living Donor Liver Transplant**

Donor morbidity and mortality are prime concerns in donors undergoing right lobe, left lobe, or left lateral segment donor partial hepatectomy as part of living-donor liver transplantation. Partial hepatectomy is a technically demanding surgery, the success of which may be related to the availability of an experienced surgical team. In 2000, the American Society of Transplant Surgeons proposed the following guidelines for living donors:

- Should be healthy individuals who are carefully evaluated and approved by a multidisciplinary team including hepatologists and surgeons to assure that they can tolerate the procedure

- Should undergo evaluation to assure that they fully understand the procedure and associated risks

- Should be of legal age and have sufficient intellectual ability to understand the procedures and give informed consent

- Should be emotionally related to the recipients

- Must be excluded if the donor is felt or known to be coerced
• Needs to have the ability and willingness to comply with long-term follow-up.

**Medicare Advantage**

If a transplant is needed, we arrange to have the Medicare–approved transplant center review and decide whether the patient is an appropriate candidate for the transplant.

**Background**

**Recipients**

Liver transplantation is now routinely performed as a treatment of last resort for patients with end-stage liver disease. Liver transplantation may be performed with liver donation after brain or cardiac death or with a liver segment donation from a living donor. Patients are prioritized for transplant by mortality risk and severity of illness criteria developed by OPTN and UNOS. The original liver allocation system was based on assignment to status 1, 2A, 2B, or 3. Status 2A, 2B, and 3 were based on the Child-Turcotte-Pugh score, which included a subjective assessment of symptoms as part of the scoring system. In February 2002, status 2A, 2B, and 3 were replaced with two disease severity scales: MELD and PELD for patients younger than age 12 years scoring systems. In June 2013, OPTN/UNOS published its most recent allocation system, which previously expanded status 1 to status 1A and 1B in September 2012. Status 1A patients have acute liver failure with a life expectancy of less than seven days without a liver transplant. Status 1A patients also include primary graft nonfunction, hepatic artery thrombosis and acute Wilson disease. Status 1A patients must be recertified as status 1A every seven days. Status 1B patients are pediatric patients (age range, zero to 17 years) with chronic liver disease listed as: fulminant liver failure, primary nonfunction, hepatic artery thrombosis, acute decompensated Wilson disease, chronic liver disease; and nonmetastatic hepatoblastoma. Pediatric patients move to status 1A at age 18 but still qualify for pediatric indications.

Following status 1, donor livers will be prioritized to those with the highest scores on MELD or PELD. With this allocation system, the highest priority for liver transplantation is given to patients receiving the highest number of points. The scoring system for MELD and PELD is a continuous disease severity scale based entirely on objective laboratory values. These scales have been found to be highly predictive of the risk of dying from liver disease for patients waiting on the transplant list. The MELD score incorporates bilirubin, prothrombin time (i.e., international normalized ratio), and creatinine into an equation, producing a number that ranges from six to 40. The PELD score incorporates albumin, bilirubin, INR growth failure, and age at listing. Waiting time will only be used to break ties among patients with the same MELD or PELD score and blood type compatibility. In the previous system, waiting time was often a key determinant of liver allocation, and yet, waiting time was found to be a poor predictor of the urgency of liver transplant because some patients were listed early in the course of their disease, while others were listed only when they became sicker. In the revised allocation systems, patients with a higher mortality risk and higher MELD/PELD scores will always be considered before those with lower scores, even if some patients with lower scores have waited longer. Status 7 describes patients who are temporarily inactive on the transplant waiting list due to being temporarily unsuitable for transplantation. Pediatric patients who turn 18 are status X.

**Donors**

Due to the scarcity of donor livers, a variety of strategies have been developed to expand the donor pool. For example, split graft refers to dividing a donor liver into two segments that can be used for two recipients. Living donor liver transplantation (LDLT) is now commonly performed for adults and children from a related or unrelated donor. Depending on the graft size needed for the recipient, either the right lobe, left lobe or the left lateral segment can be used for LDLT. In addition to addressing the problem of donor organ scarcity, LDLT allows
the procedure to be scheduled electively before the recipient’s condition deteriorates or serious complications develop. LDLT also shortens the preservation time for the donor liver and decreases disease transmission from donor to recipient.

**Note:** Management of acute rejection of liver transplant using plasmapheresis is discussed separately in the Plasma Exchange Protocol. In addition, the role of chemoembolization or radiofrequency ablation as a bridge to transplant in patients with hepatocellular cancer is addressed separately in the Transcatheter Arterial Chemoembolization to Treat Primary or Metastatic Liver Malignancies Protocol and the Radiofrequency Ablation of Primary or Metastatic Liver Tumors Protocol, respectively.

**Related Protocol**

Small Bowel/Liver and Multivisceral Transplant

Services that are the subject of a clinical trial do not meet our Technology Assessment Protocol criteria and are considered investigational. *For explanation of experimental and investigational, please refer to the Technology Assessment Protocol.*

It is expected that only appropriate and medically necessary services will be rendered. We reserve the right to conduct prepayment and postpayment reviews to assess the medical appropriateness of the above-referenced procedures. **Some of this Protocol may not pertain to the patients you provide care to, as it may relate to products that are not available in your geographic area.**

**References**

We are not responsible for the continuing viability of web site addresses that may be listed in any references below.


