

How Highmark Determines if a Medical Technology or Drug is Experimental

Medical researchers constantly experiment with new medical equipment, drugs and other technologies to solve health concerns. As a result, health care plans need a scientific way to judge when such technologies have proven medically safe, effective and useful enough to merit coverage.

Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield believes medical technology judgments should be made by medical professionals. A panel of more than 250 health care professionals and our nationally recognized Medical Affairs Committee help us with technology review and policy making.

“Medical technology” can refer to diverse treatments, services, procedures, facility equipment, drug devices and other supplies used in medical care. For this reason, the Committee includes members with expertise in many areas of medicine.

Evaluating medical technology

Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield constantly conducts medical technology and policy evaluations to keep up with new technologies and new uses for existing technologies. Sometimes, a review may occur because of provider or member questions about a technology’s use and/or plan benefits.

An evaluation includes researching relevant medical literature, checking regulatory agency positions, and gathering expert opinions from consulting practitioners. The Committee also considers these questions:

1. Has the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) given approval to marketing the technology for the relevant medical situation(s)?
2. Does available scientific evidence permit conclusions about the effect of the technology on health outcomes?
3. Has the technology been proven as safe or effective as alternative therapies while achieving an equally good or better outcome for patients?
4. Does the technology improve health outcomes?
5. Has the technology been proven applicable outside a research setting?

If a technology earns a “yes” answer for each question, the Medical Affairs Committee may recommend that it be considered as acceptable medical practice. Technology that merits this status may be considered for coverage through benefit packages.

Technology that doesn’t merit this status is usually considered “experimental/investigative.” Typically, such technology is not covered by health plans, because it doesn’t meet professional criteria for standard medical practice. However, if such technology evolves to where it may meet these criteria, our Committee will consider it for re-review.

If you have questions about coverage for services involving recent medical technology, check your benefits literature or call Member Service.