



## PT INITIAL EVALUATIONS: FOCUS ON CLINICAL PRESENTATION

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October 2017

Physical therapists must document clinical presentation as one of the four initial evaluation components to support the appropriate evaluation complexity code. The following table shows which clinical presentation relates to each complexity level:

| Evaluation Complexity | Clinical Presentation   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Low                   | <b>Stable</b> and/or uncomplicated characteristics                  |
| Moderate              | <b>Evolving</b> clinical presentation with changing characteristics |
| High                  | <b>Unstable</b> and unpredictable characteristics                   |

Physical therapists should note the following two important points regarding initial evaluation components that apply to the clinical presentation, as well as the other three components (i.e., history, examination and clinical decision making):

1. If the documentation does not clearly show the clinical presentation, it will be deemed to be stable. A therapist cannot assume that an auditor, insurer or anyone else will correctly determine the clinical presentation based on the other evaluation components. Clinical presentation must be documented.
2. To support the chosen complexity level, all requirements for that level must be met. If not, the “correct” coded choice defaults to the lower level where all requirements are met. This means that if the therapist does not document an “evolving” clinical presentation, a moderate complexity level will not be supported (even if the history, examination and clinical decision making demonstrate moderate); the “correct” code would default to the low level.

The best practice is to ALWAYS include ONE of the clinical presentation descriptors in the assessment portion of the initial evaluation and describe why the presentation is e.g., “evolving” or “unstable” per the following guidelines:

**STABLE** and/or uncomplicated characteristics relate to signs and symptoms that remain localized to the body structure or function of the primary diagnosis. An example would be a knee sprain with pain and swelling normal for that injury and an expectation that the patient’s clinical course will progress in a typical manner. Include the words “stable” or “uncomplicated” in the assessment.

**EVOLVING** clinical presentation has changing characteristics. For example, pain fluctuations, changing signs or symptoms, weight bearing changes or issues with vital signs related to co-morbidities. The documentation should state “evolving clinical presentation with changing characteristics” and describe what has been changing and what will be monitored, such as fluctuating pain, swelling, changes in vital signs, etc., to support an “evolving” clinical presentation statement.

**UNSTABLE** and unpredictable characteristics are evident in a high complexity evaluation and are identified when a patient might have sudden decreases in blood pressure, difficulty breathing during the evaluation, symptoms that have been worsening in the days leading up to the evaluation, or other indications that the condition is unstable. State that the presentation is unstable and describe the clinical findings that led to that decision.