A Learner’s Guide to Coding 101: MedEdPORTAL version

Clinicians need to select billing “codes” for patients. If school didn’t prepare you, Coding 101 is here to help.

What is this? Coding 101 is a collection of independent learning tools: video modules, practice tools, self-study quizzes, links to national coding instructions, and practice worksheets. Collectively, the content provides an introduction to coding. Keep in mind, Coding 101 is more than just videos. If you only view the videos, you will not be prepared to code on your own.

Why should I bother? You need to earn compensation for your services. Even if you are salaried, you still have to submit billing codes, and you need to avoid errors that can lead to accusations of billing fraud. If you want to avoid federal investigation, you must know this stuff. If you think a computer will handle this for you, beware; even electronic health records with integrated billing don’t substitute for knowledge of coding rules. If you are the billing provider, you are responsible for the submitted billing codes. Simply put, this is worth your personal attention.

How should I use this stuff? Your educational director will determine how s/he wishes you to proceed. If you are learning on your own, here are suggestions:

• By using the Coding 101 curriculum, you acknowledge that you have read and accept the Disclaimer document file.
• Start by viewing Coding 101, Part 1. Spend as much time with the video as you need to feel comfortable with the learning objectives. Use the Table of Contents to review confusing sections. Consider taking Quick Quiz #1 to reinforce the content.
• Print a copy of the 1995 guideline worksheets (see the Supplementary Materials) to have in hand before moving on to Part 2: E&M Coding. When viewing Part 2, pause the videos periodically to review the guideline worksheets and understand the criteria grids. This will help you to get familiar with the worksheets. Go back over any confusing sections. After completing the Part 2 videos, review the official CMS guides to 1995 and 1997 E&M coding (see the Suggested Links.) Try Quick Quiz #2 if you like.
• DO NOT go on to Part 3: Beyond the Basics just yet. You must feel comfortable with Part 2 and the worksheets first. Sit down with one of your own clinic charts, select the appropriate worksheet, and decide what CPT code your documentation supported. Try coding other patients, including a new visit. Be sure to consider medical necessity. Try this until the rules begin to feel clearer.
• When you are comfortable auditing your notes, go on to Part 3, Beyond the Basics. After viewing those videos, try more challenging audits – how would you have billed for preventive or counseling care? Should the visit have been billed by time? …with a modifier?
• In real life, physicians don’t audit their notes (or even finish writing them!) prior to selecting a billing code. They learn to select the appropriate code level for each visit’s medical complexity. Once you understand the coding rules and work through a few retrospective audits, try reviewing the practical Coding Examples. They introduce the principle of coding based on medical necessity.
• After review of all the above content, you may wish to view the inpatient and advanced coding videos, Parts 4 and 5. Further advanced content is available through the suggested links page.
• Your faculty may require you to complete the Examination as part of your learning portfolio.

How much time will this take? The core videos total about 1 hour, but you must do some chart audits as well. Those may go slow at first. Your first coding audit might take 10 minutes just to count the key components. Trust me, once you have done a few and you get to know the worksheets, audits will only take a minute.

When on earth do you expect me to get this done? Work through Parts 1 to 3 as soon as possible, preferably during your first year of training, then come back to the content throughout training. No physician masters coding quickly. Work with your continuity clinic group or a faculty member when you first do audits. Your training director may organize discussion groups or conferences on coding. You will want to see how others tally a code; you will be surprised to see what differences of opinion you have about the same office visit. Encourage your faculty to review the Coding 101 “Teacher’s Guide.” If possible, spend extra time on this during your final training year so you feel competent selecting codes on graduation.

Your colleague in coding,
Davoren Chick, MD, FACP