Levels of Ambulance Transport & Medical Transportation Services

Comprehensive Reference Guide for EMS, Billing, and Healthcare Stakeholders

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Purpose of This Document

This document explains the **different levels of ambulance transport and medical transportation services** recognized in U.S. healthcare reimbursement systems, with particular alignment to **Medicare**, **Medicaid**, and common commercial insurance frameworks.

It is intended to clarify:

- The **type of vehicle and staffing** involved
- The **level of medical care provided**
- How **medical necessity** determines the appropriate level
- How ambulance transport differs from **non-emergency medical transportation (NEMT)** and **wheelchair transport**

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1. Ground Ambulance Services

Ground ambulance services involve the transportation of a patient in a licensed ambulance vehicle equipped to provide medical care during transport. Payment and coverage are based on the **level of care required**, not simply the type of vehicle used.

Basic Life Support (BLS)

Overview

Basic Life Support (BLS) involves transportation by a standard ground ambulance staffed by **at least two qualified personnel**, including **at least one EMT-Basic**.

Scope of Care

BLS services include medically necessary care such as:

- Patient assessment and monitoring
- Basic airway management (e.g., oxygen, airway positioning)
- Hemorrhage control
- Vital signs monitoring
- Patient stabilization without advanced invasive procedures

Emergency vs Non-Emergency BLS

- **Emergency BLS**: Immediate response required because other transportation could endanger the patient's health
- **Non-Emergency BLS**: Medically necessary transport that is not immediately life-threatening (e.g., discharges, transfers)

Coverage Principles

- Covered when the patient **cannot be safely transported by other means**
- Requires documentation explaining why alternatives (car, wheelchair van) were not appropriate

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2. Advanced Life Support (ALS)

Advanced Life Support (ALS) includes a higher level of assessment and intervention and requires more advanced staffing and equipment.

ALS is divided into **two distinct levels**.

ALS Level 1 (ALS1)

Staffing & Vehicle Requirements

- Ground ambulance
- Minimum of two crew members
- At least one **EMT-Intermediate or Paramedic**

Defining Characteristics

ALS1 is billed when:

- An **ALS assessment** is performed, and/or

- **At least one ALS intervention** is provided

Examples of ALS1 Interventions

- Intravenous (IV) access and fluid administration
- Cardiac monitoring or 12-lead ECG
- Manual defibrillation
- IV medication administration (single or limited)

Emergency ALS1

ALS1 may be classified as **emergency** when:

- The response was immediate
- The patient's condition required urgent intervention

ALS Level 2 (ALS2)

Overview

ALS2 represents the **highest level of ground ambulance care** short of specialty or air medical transport.

Defining Criteria

ALS2 is characterized by **either**:

1. **Three or more separate administrations of IV medications** (excluding simple IV fluids), **or**
2. Performance of **advanced, invasive procedures**, such as:
    - Manual defibrillation or cardioversion
    - Endotracheal intubation
    - Central venous or intraosseous line placement
    - Cardiac pacing
    - Chest decompression
    - Surgical airway procedures

Important Clarifications

- Medications administered by **oral, subcutaneous, intramuscular, or nebulized routes** do **not** qualify for ALS2
- ALS2 is reserved for patients requiring **intensive, ongoing interventions** during transport

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3. Specialty Care Transport (SCT)

Overview

Specialty Care Transport (SCT) is used when a patient requires **continuous, highly specialized medical care** during transport that exceeds standard ALS capabilities.

Staffing Requirements

Care is provided by one or more specialty-trained clinicians, such as:

- Critical care nurse
- Critical care paramedic
- Respiratory therapist
- Physician

Clinical Use Cases

SCT is appropriate when patients require:

- Mechanical ventilation management
- Continuous titration of vasoactive medications
- Invasive hemodynamic monitoring
- Care beyond EMT-Paramedic scope as defined by state regulations

Key Requirement

SCT only qualifies when the **level of care provided is above and beyond standard ALS**, not merely because a specialty provider is present.

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4. Air Ambulance Services

Air ambulance transport is used when **ground transportation is impractical, unsafe, or too slow** to meet the patient's medical needs.

Indications for Air Transport

- Remote or inaccessible locations
- Time-sensitive medical emergencies
- Severe trauma, stroke, STEMI, or critical illness
- Traffic or terrain barriers preventing timely ground transport

Types of Air Ambulance Services

Fixed-Wing (Airplane)

- Used for **long-distance transports**
- Appropriate for interfacility transfers across regions or states
- Requires airports or airstrips for takeoff and landing

Rotary-Wing (Helicopter)

- Used for **rapid response** and short-to-medium distances
- Commonly deployed for scene responses and rural emergencies
- Can land closer to incident scenes or hospitals

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5. Emergency vs Non-Emergency Ambulance Transport

Emergency Transport

- Immediate response required
- Delay or alternative transportation could endanger the patient's health
- Commonly initiated via 911

Non-Emergency Transport

- Medically necessary, but not an immediate threat to life or health
- Often scheduled or planned
- May require **physician certification or authorization**, depending on payer

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6. Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT)

Overview

NEMT services provide transportation for patients who:

- Do **not** require ambulance-level medical care
- Need assistance reaching medical appointments

Common NEMT Modalities

- Sedan or rideshare-type vehicles
- Wheelchair-accessible vans
- Stretcher vans (non-ambulance)

Key Distinction

NEMT services:

- **Do not provide medical care** during transport
- Are not staffed by EMS clinicians
- Are not equipped for emergency intervention

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7. Wheelchair Transportation

Overview

Wheelchair transport is appropriate when patients:

- Are medically stable
- Can sit upright
- Require mobility assistance but **no medical monitoring or intervention**

Coverage Principles

- Typically covered under Medicaid NEMT or commercial benefits
- Not covered under the Medicare ambulance benefit
- Must not be billed as ambulance transport

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8. Coverage & Documentation Principles (All Payers)

Key Coverage Rules

- Payment is based on the **level of medically necessary care provided**, not simply the vehicle type
- Emergency and non-emergency services may both be covered if criteria are met
- Higher levels of care must be **clearly justified** by patient condition

Documentation Must Support:

- Why ambulance transport was required
- Why a specific level (BLS, ALS, ALS2, SCT, air) was medically necessary

- Why lower levels or non-medical transportation were not appropriate

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Summary

Ambulance and medical transportation services range from **basic medical transport** to **highly specialized critical care and air medical services**. Proper utilization depends on patient condition, medical necessity, and the intensity of care required during transport.

Understanding these distinctions supports:

- Appropriate EMS utilization
- Accurate billing and compliance
- Better alignment between clinical care and payer requirements

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This document is intended for educational and operational guidance and should be used in conjunction with applicable federal, state, and payer-specific policies.