

ICD-10-CM Guidelines Summary

Sequencing rules, excludes notes, injury coding, Z-codes — official guidelines condensed

1. ICD-10-CM Code Structure

■ ICD-10-CM codes are 3–7 characters. A decimal is placed after the 3rd character. Placeholder X is used when a 7th character is required but no 6th character exists.

Position	Purpose
Characters 1–3	Category (e.g., S52 = fracture of forearm)
Character 4	Etiology, anatomic site, or severity
Character 5	Further specificity
Character 6	Further specificity
Character 7	Extension (A=initial, D=subsequent, S=sequela for injuries)
Placeholder X	Used when 7th character needed but no 6th character exists

2. Key Instructional Notes

Note Type	What It Means
Excludes1	Pure exclusion — conditions CANNOT occur together. NEVER code both.
Excludes2	Condition NOT part of this code, but BOTH may be reported if both present.
Includes	Clarifies what IS included in the code category.
Code first	Sequence the underlying condition first (etiology/manifestation convention).
Use additional code	Add another code to fully describe the condition.
Code also	Two codes may be required — sequence depends on circumstances.
In diseases classified elsewhere	Manifestation code — never sequenced first.

3. Outpatient vs Inpatient Key Differences

■ ■ This is one of the most tested topics on the CPC exam. Know both rule sets cold.

Topic	Rule
Uncertain diagnoses	OUTPATIENT: Code signs/symptoms only — never "possible" or "probable" INPATIENT: Code uncertain diagnoses as if confirmed at discharge
Principal diagnosis	OUTPATIENT: First-listed diagnosis — reason for the visit INPATIENT: Condition established after study as chiefly responsible for admission
Chronic conditions	Both: Code as many chronic conditions as are treated/monitored
Signs & symptoms	If integral to a confirmed diagnosis — do NOT code separately
Abnormal findings	OUTPATIENT: Code if physician documents clinical significance INPATIENT: Code if physician documents clinical significance

4. Injury & 7th Character Extensions

■ For injuries, fractures, and poisoning — always assign the correct 7th character. Active treatment = A. Routine healing after active treatment = D. Late effects = S.

7th Char	Meaning	Notes
A	Initial encounter	Patient receiving active treatment for the injury
D	Subsequent encounter	Routine healing — active treatment has ended
S	Sequela	Late effect/complication arising from the injury
B	Initial encounter — open fracture type I/II	Fracture-specific
C	Initial encounter — open fracture type IIIA/B/C	Fracture-specific
G	Subsequent — delayed healing	Fracture-specific
K	Subsequent — nonunion	Fracture-specific
P	Subsequent — malunion	Fracture-specific

5. Sequencing Rules — High-Yield Topics

Scenario	Sequencing Rule
Sepsis	Sequence systemic infection code first (A40/A41), then localized infection, then organ dysfunction. Septic shock (R65.21) is NEVER principal diagnosis.
Diabetes with complications	Code the diabetes-with-complication combination code (E11.-). Add additional code for stage/severity. Add Z79.4 if insulin used.
Hypertension + CKD	Use I12.- (hypertensive CKD) — not I10 + N18 separately. Add N18.- for CKD stage.
Hypertension + Heart disease	Use I11.- (hypertensive heart disease). Add I50.- if heart failure present.
Pathological fracture	Sequence M84.5- (pathological fracture) first, then neoplasm code.
Poisoning	Sequence poisoning code first, then manifestation. Adverse effects: injury code first, then drug code.
Obstetric complications	Always sequence O code first for pregnant patient with complication.
HIV + AIDS	Once AIDS confirmed, always code B20 (AIDS). Z21 for asymptomatic HIV-positive.

6. Z-Codes — Common Categories

Z-Code Range	Category
Z00–Z13	Encounters for examinations and screening
Z14–Z15	Genetic carrier and susceptibility to disease
Z16	Resistance to antimicrobial drugs
Z17	Estrogen receptor status
Z20–Z29	Contact with and exposure to communicable diseases
Z30–Z39	Reproductive health encounters (contraception, pregnancy)
Z40–Z53	Encounters for specific procedures and aftercare
Z55–Z65	Social determinants of health (SDOH)
Z66	Do not resuscitate status
Z67	Blood type
Z68	Body mass index (BMI)
Z77–Z99	Personal and family history, status codes

Z-Code Range	Category
Z85.-	Personal history of malignant neoplasm
Z87.-	Personal history of other conditions
Z79.-	Long-term (current) drug therapy — Z79.4 = insulin

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