Cytopathology, also called cytology, involves preparing, examining, and interpreting “smears” of cellular material on microscope slides to evaluate disease processes. CPT® divides cytopathology specimens into three groups — “cervical or vaginal;” “fluids, washings, or brushings;” or “any other source.” We’ll discuss the latter two non-gynecological specimens in this section.

Watch for special stains: For any of these cytopathology preparations, the pathologist might use special stains to aid in visualizing and diagnosing the specimen. If so, you should separately code for the special stain, which we'll explain in detail in chapter 21.

A word about “global” service: Non-gynecological cytology codes 88104-88112 and 88160-88162 represent both a technical service (preparing the slides) and a professional service (interpreting the smears). If a single billing entity performs both the technical and professional components, you should report the appropriate code — which is the “global” service. If separate billing entities perform the technical and professional services (such a hospital lab and an independent pathologist), each entity should bill the code with the appropriate modifier, TC (Technical component) or 26 (Professional component).

1. Fluids, Washings, or Brushings

Fluids, washings, or brushings include specimens such as bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL), cerebral spinal fluid (CSF), sputum, urine, and bronchial brushings. You’ll use one of the following codes to describe cytopathology for these specimens:

- 88104 — Cytopathology, fluids, washings or brushings, except cervical or vaginal; smears with interpretation
- 88106 — ... simple filter method with interpretation
- 88108 — Cytopathology, concentration technique, smears and interpretation (e.g., Saccomanno technique)
- 88112 — Cytopathology, selective cellular enhancement technique with interpretation (e.g., liquid based slide preparation method), except cervical or vaginal.

Code 88104 involves directly smearing the specimen onto a slide, while 88106 describes filtering the specimen using a basic technology such as a Millipore filter before smearing it onto a slide. Use 88108 for methods that concentrate the specimen, such as centrifugation (cytospin) or Saccomanno technique, which labs commonly use for sputum preparation. Reserve 88112 for techniques that involve multiple steps such as filter concentration and enhancement of cytological material followed by mono-layer transfer to a glass slide. Use 88112 for commercial, liquid-based non-gynecological cytology methods such as SurePath or ThinPrep.

Do this: Select the cytology code based on the definition that most closely matches the method your lab uses to process and examine the specimen.

Caution: Report cytopathology codes only once per specimen, regardless of the number of slides.

Watch Medicare bundling rules: Even if the cytopathology exam involves different smear preparations, such as a direct smear and a concentrated smear, you should report only the most extensive procedure for a single specimen, according to instructions from the Correct Coding Initiative (CCI). Other payers may not follow the same bundling rules.

Example 1: Lab personnel vacuum wash a bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL) specimen on a cellulose filter and smear filtered cells onto a slide for pathologist examination and report.

Solution 1: List this service as 88106.

Example 2: The lab processes cerebrospinal fluid using centrifugation and filtration for cellular enhancement before applying a monolayer suspension to a slide for evaluation using ThinPrep imaging system.
Solution 2: Bill for this procedure using 88112.

2. Any Other Source

When you see the words, “any other source” in cytopathology, that means any cellular specimen that is not gynecological and is not from fluids, washings, or brushings. That doesn’t leave much — but you should look to the following three codes to report these cytopathology services:

- 88160 — Cytopathology, smears, any other source; screening and interpretation
- 88161 — ... preparation, screening and interpretation
- 88162 — ... extended study involving over 5 slides and/or multiple stains.

Direct smears: For a direct smear from any other source, such as a nipple smear or direct sputum smear, you should use 88160.

Touch preps: Unlike 88160, 88161 includes “preparation,” which refers to a type of cytopathology smear called “touch preparation.” You’ll also commonly hear the procedure referred to as “touch prep” or “squash prep.” The procedure involves pressing (squashing) a tissue specimen, such as a breast biopsy, onto a slide to examine the cellular material left behind.

Don’t use 88161 for touch preps during surgery: When your pathologist consults with a surgeon and performs touch preps to help provide diagnostic information during surgery, you should not list 88161. Instead, you should report intra-operative touch preps with 88333 and 88334, which you can read about in chapter 21 of this study guide.

Multiple slides: Remember that you should report one code (88104-88112) for a fluid, washing, or brushing specimen, regardless of the number of slides. But for “any other source” cytopathology specimens, CPT® provides a different code when the pathologist examines over five slides — 88162.

Red flag: Code 88162 is only for “any other source” specimens — zealous coders sometimes want to use this code whenever they report an extensive cytopathology case.

Example: A patient with a compromised immune system presents with a dry cough, fever, and shortness of breath. The physician suspects pneumocystosis and orders an induced sputum sample for evaluation. The lab places the sputum in Saccomanno fluid to concentrate and preserve the cells before preparing and evaluating smears. The lab prepares some slides with a histochemical stain to aid in diagnosing pneumocystosis.

Solution: For the concentrated smear preparation and evaluation, use 88108. You should also report the special stain as 88342 (Immunohistochemistry or immunocytochemistry, per specimen; initial single antibody stain procedure).