Fecal Occult Blood Tests (FOBT) (effective January 1, 2004)

Fecal occult blood tests (FOBTs) are generally divided into two types: immunoassay and guaiac types. Immunoassay (or immunochemical) fecal occult blood tests (iFOBT) use “antibodies directed against human globin epitopes”. While most iFOBTs use spatulas to collect stool samples, some use a brush to collect toilet water surrounding the stool. Most iFOBTs require laboratory processing.

Guaiac fecal occult blood tests (gFOBT) use a peroxidase reaction to indicate presence of the heme portion of hemoglobin. Guaiac turns blue after oxidation by oxidants or peroxidases in the presence of an oxygen donor such as hydrogen peroxide. Most FOBTs use sticks to collect stool samples and may be developed in a physician’s office or laboratory. In 1998, Medicare began reimbursement for guaiac FOBTs, but not immunoassay type tests for colorectal cancer screening. Since the fundamental process is similar for other iFOBTs, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services evaluated colorectal cancer screening using immunoassay FOBTs in general.

Effective for dates of service on and after January 1, 2004, Medicare covers one screening FOBT per annum for the early detection of colorectal cancer. This means that Medicare will cover one guaiac-based (gFOBT) or one immunoassay-based (iFOBT) at a frequency of every 12 months; i.e., at least 11 months have passed following the month in which the last covered screening FOBT was performed, for beneficiaries aged 50 years and older. The beneficiary completes the existing gFOBT by taking samples from two different sites of three consecutive stools; the beneficiary completes the iFOBT by taking the appropriate number of stool samples according to the specific manufacturer’s instructions. This screening requires a written order from the beneficiary’s attending physician, or for claims with dates of service on or after January 27, 2014, by a beneficiary’s attending physician assistant, nurse practitioner, or clinical nurse specialist. (“Attending physician” means a doctor of medicine or osteopathy (as defined in §1861(r)(1) of the Social Security Act (the Act) who is fully knowledgeable about the beneficiary’s medical condition, and who would be responsible for using the results of any examination performed in the overall management of the beneficiary’s specific medical problem.)