External Cause Codes (ECC)

One area where coders struggle when assigning external cause codes is locating the main term. Practice helps in this case, and the more you apply these codes by looking them up in the External Causes Index, the easier it will become.

CAPE is one acronym used to assist in coding external causes.

C – Cause of the injury

A – Activity being done when the injury occurred

P – Place activity occurred

E – External cause status

Let's apply this acronym by looking at the scenario below and discussing how to find each of the CAPE components. It is important to note that every scenario may not have all four external cause codes. As long as you know the word CAPE and remember what each letter stands for, you should be able to break down each scenario and assign the proper codes.

Scenario: The patient presents for an initial encounter for injury sustained due to her nightgown catching fire while cooking breakfast in the kitchen of her mobile home.

The injury that was sustained is not given here (it would typically be an injury, such as a burn, and noted in the patient's chart; that would need to be coded first).

Let's look at the cause of the injury. The cause was the nightgown catching fire while cooking breakfast. We can look in our External Causes Index and for the main term fire, which sends us to exposure, fire. Underneath that, we find controlled, with ignition (of) clothing, and we find nightwear under that. This leads us to code X05, which we need to verify in the Tabular List. When we get to the Tabular List, we see it needs 7 characters. Our final code will be X05.XXXA.

Next, let's look at our activity. What was the patient doing? Cooking breakfast. So, we will start with our main term as an activity. Under activity, we will find cooking and baking, which is code Y93.G3. We need to verify this in the Tabular List. When we do, we see it is the proper code.

We need the place where the accident occurred. This accident occurred in the kitchen of her mobile home. Let's start with the main term place of occurrence in the External Causes Index. Under that, we will look for a mobile home and then find the kitchen, which is code Y92.020. When we verify this in the tabular list, we see that is the correct code.

We need to look at the status of the patient. Let's look at the main term status in the External Causes Index. Under status, the one that best describes this is a leisure activity, which is code Y99.8. When we verify it in the Tabular List, we see that is the code we will use.