



Travel Allowance Fees for Specimen Collection: CY 2026 Updates

Related Change Request (CR) Information	
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Transmittal Number: R13576CP	
Title: Clinical Laboratory Fee Schedule – Medicare Travel Allowance Fees for Collection of Specimens and New Updates for 2026	

Affected Providers

- Laboratories
- Laboratory technicians
- Other providers billing Medicare Administrative Contractors (MACs) for specimen collection services

Action Needed

Make sure your billing staff knows about these updates, effective January 1, 2026:

- Revised payment allowances for HCPCS code P9603
- Updated general specimen collection fee and travel allowance rate
- HCPCS and CPT codes that describe specimen collection

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Key Updates

CMS updates the nominal fee for specimen collection based on the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) (U.S. city average) for the 12-month period ending June 30 of the year preceding the update year (July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025). The CY 2026 CPI-U is 2.7%.

For CY 2026, we increased the general specimen collection fee by the CPI-U for CY 2026 (2.7%) and calculate it to equal the CY 2025 general specimen collection fee (\$9.09) multiplied by 1.027 for a total of \$9.34. As required by the [Protecting Access to Medicare Act of 2014](#), we'll then increase the general specimen collection fee amount by \$2 for those specimens collected from a patient in a skilled nursing facility (SNF) or by a laboratory on behalf of a home health agency. This will result in an \$11.34 specimen collection fee for those patients.

To be eligible for a collection fee, specimens must be:

- Used to perform a clinical diagnostic laboratory test (CDLT) paid under the Clinical Laboratory Fee Schedule (CLFS) regulations at [42 CFR 414.523](#)
- Collected by a trained technician from a homebound Medicare patient, as described in [42 CFR 424.22\(a\)\(1\)\(ii\)](#), or from a non-hospital inpatient but only when no qualified personnel are available at the facility to collect the specimen
- One of the following types:
 - A blood specimen collected through venipuncture (inserting a needle into a vein with a syringe or vacutainer to draw the specimen)
 - A urine sample collected via catheterization

Specimen collection fees aren't payable:

- For any other specimen types, including blood samples where the collection cost of the specimen is minimal (such as throat culture or a routine capillary puncture for clotting or bleeding time)
- To anyone who hasn't extracted the specimen

We allow only 1 collection fee for:

- Each type of specimen for each patient encounter, regardless of the number of specimens drawn. We allow only 1 specimen collection fee if a technician draws multiple types of specimens from 1 patient.
- A series of specimens required to complete a single test (for example, glucose tolerance test), which we consider a single encounter.

We allow payment for a specimen collection fee:

- When it's medically necessary for a trained technician to draw a specimen from either a nursing home patient, non-hospital inpatient, or homebound patient
- When the trained technician personally draws the specimen

Specimen collection fees aren't allowed to the visiting technician if:

- A patient isn't confined to the facility
- The facility has personnel on duty qualified to collect specimens

Medical necessity exists for such services where a trained technician draws a blood specimen from a homebound or institutionalized patient. Homebound patients don't need to be bedridden.

We don't consider a specimen pickup service medically necessary if the type of specimen only requires those messenger services and not that of a skilled technician (urine or sputum).

The phrase trained technician refers to those staff providing specimen collection services. However, the term trained technician doesn't mandate certain educational requirements, and for specimen collection provision purposes, the term includes a phlebotomist.

Note: These CPT and HCPCS codes describe specimen collection:

- 36415 – Collection of venous blood by venipuncture
- G0471 – Collection of venous blood by venipuncture or urine sample by catheterization from an individual in a skilled nursing facility (SNF) or by a laboratory on behalf of a home health agency (HHA)
- P9612 – Catheterization for collection of specimen, single patient, all places of services
- P9615 – Catheterization for collection of specimen(s), (multiple patients)

Travel Allowance Policy

For travel allowance, 42 CFR 414.523(a)(2) reflects the travel allowance requirements for specimen collection. Per section 1833(h)(3)(B) of the [Social Security Act](#), we include these requirements for the travel allowance methodology:

- A general requirement
- Travel allowance basis requirements
- Travel allowance amount requirements

In addition, we have the following policies:

- When we pay specimen collection fees, we pay the travel allowance. See the [Medicare Claims Policy Manual Chapter 16](#), section 60 and 42 CFR 414.523(a)(1) for specimen collection payment requirements. We only pay the travel allowance when claims meet these requirements.
- We don't pay travel allowances when a trained technician only performs messenger services to pick up specimens drawn by other technicians.
- We provide the travel allowance only with respect to a patient who's homebound or an inpatient in an inpatient facility (other than a hospital) and when a trained technician draws the specimen.
- We make only 1 travel allowance payment for specimen collection for a patient based on their location and only when a patient requires specimen collection necessary to perform a CDLT. We only consider Medicare patients when calculating and paying the travel allowance as it's based on statutory language (the location of an individual) regarding the patient's location who's receiving specimen collection services. We don't include non-Medicare patients in any portion of the travel allowance calculation.

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Travel Allowance Eligible Miles

Eligible miles:

- Are those included to calculate the travel allowance amount
- Begin at the laboratory or at the starting point of the trained technician's travel for specimen collection
- End at the laboratory or the ending point of the trained technician's travel for specimen collection

Such travel may begin or end at the laboratory or another location.

Eligible miles don't include miles traveled for any purpose unrelated to specimen collection, such as collecting specimens from non-Medicare patients or for personal reasons. If a technician doesn't collect any specimens at a location, miles to that location aren't eligible.

Effective January 1, 2022:

- We made permanent the option for laboratories to maintain electronic documentation of miles traveled to cover transportation and personnel expenses for trained technicians to travel to a patient's location to collect a specimen sample.
- This option for laboratories to maintain electronic documentation applies to specimen collection for any CDLT.
- Laboratories may use electronic and other documentation to demonstrate miles traveled for specimen collection.
- Laboratories must produce electronic documentation in a form and manner shareable with MACs. Laboratories should continue to consult with their MAC regarding the format and process for submitting this information when necessary.

Travel Allowance Mileage Rate

The [Social Security Act](#) requires the travel allowance to cover both the transportation and personnel expenses for trained personnel to travel to a patient's location and collect a sample. The travel allowance mileage rate reflects both these components.

- The transportation component equals the IRS standard mileage rate. The IRS updates and issues standard mileage rates periodically, and they calculate the deductible costs of operating an automobile for business, charitable, medical, or moving for calculating federal taxes.
- The personnel expenses component of the travel allowance mileage rate is where the trained technician's personnel expenses is based on a wage-per-mile amount. Effective January 1, 2023, we use wage data in the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)-defined category of phlebotomist to establish the personnel expense component of the travel allowance mileage rate. We use the latest available published figure for the median hourly wage amount for phlebotomists, which the BLS publishes, to annually update the travel allowance amount for specimen collection.

We calculate a per-mile amount to derive the approximate number of miles traveled by the trained technician each hour by using an average driving speed. We multiply the average miles-per-hour (MPH) driving speed by the trained technician's estimated wages, as described above, and the result represents wages per mile, which are personnel expenses associated with travel for specimen collection. We use an average of 40 MPH as most travel related to specimen collection would occur in local and residential areas.

To establish the personnel expenses component of the travel allowance mileage rate, which is a per-mile amount, we divide the most recent median hourly wage for phlebotomists, as published by the BLS, by 40 to represent an average MPH.

The total travel allowance mileage rate, including both the transportation and personnel expenses components for travel by trained personnel to collect specimens, is equal to the IRS standard mileage rate plus an amount to cover expenses for a trained technician that's equal to the most recent median hourly wage for phlebotomists, as published by the BLS, divided by 40 to represent an average MPH driving speed.

Travel Allowance Mileage Rate Updates

We issue annual updates to the travel allowance mileage rate via our CR process. We base these updates on the most recent IRS standard mileage rate and phlebotomist wage rate, published by the BLS. The revised travel allowance mileage rate will be effective for the January update of the CLFS file.

For CY 2026, the travel allowance mileage rate is \$1.25, based on both:

- The IRS standard mileage rate, which is \$0.725
- The most recent median BLS-published hourly wage for phlebotomists, which is \$20.99, divided by 40 to represent an average MPH driving speed, which is \$0.52

Travel Allowance Bases: Flat Rate & Per Mile

We pay a travel allowance based on a:

- Flat-rate travel allowance
- Per-mile travel allowance

Flat-Rate Travel Allowance

We apply the flat-rate travel allowance when the trained technician travels 20 eligible miles or less to and from 1 location for specimen collection from 1 or more patients.

Laboratories use HCPCS code P9604 to bill Medicare for the flat-rate travel allowance amount. We prorate these payments by the number of patients for which a specimen collection fee applies.

Per-Mile Travel Allowance

We apply the per-mile travel allowance in 2 circumstances:

1. When the round-trip travel to 1 location is greater than 20 eligible miles for specimen collection from 1 or more patients
2. When travel is to more than 1 location, regardless of the number of miles traveled

Laboratories use HCPCS code P9603 to bill Medicare for the per-mile travel allowance amount. We prorate these payments by the number of patients for which a specimen collection fee applies.

Calculation: Flat-Rate Travel Allowance

We calculate the flat-rate travel allowance by:

1. Multiplying the travel allowance mileage rate by 10
2. Dividing by the number of patients for which a specimen collection fee applies

This ensures we distribute the flat-rate travel allowance amount (\$12.50) to each patient receiving specimen collection services and ensures we calculate payment in an operationally feasible manner. A laboratory must submit a claim for each patient to receive the travel allowance. This method allows us to distribute a fixed payment amount to the number of patients for whom we pay a specimen collection fee in a specific location.

Calculation: Per-Mile Travel Allowance

We calculate the per-mile travel allowance by:

1. Multiplying the number of eligible miles by the travel allowance mileage rate
2. Dividing by the number of patients for whom we pay a specimen collection fee

This quotient yields a prorated travel allowance amount for each patient. The laboratory gets payment for the total number of eligible miles traveled for specimen collection, distributed equally to each patient for whom we pay a specimen collection fee. The laboratory submits its claim billing HCPCS code P9603 for payment of each patient's per-mile travel allowance amount.

To calculate the per-mile travel allowance amount, the laboratory first must calculate the total number of eligible miles the trained technician traveled to locations where 1 or more patients received specimen collection services and those miles back to the laboratory where the technician returns the specimens for testing.

Background

Per section 1833(h)(3) of the Social Security Act, Medicare Part B allows payment for specimen collection fees and travel allowances, when medically necessary, for a laboratory technician to draw a specimen from either a nursing home or homebound patient.

In the [CY 2023 Physician Fee Schedule Final Rule](#), we finalized codification and clarification of various laboratory specimen collection fee and travel allowance policies in 42 CFR 414.523(a)(1) and (2).

CR 14345 revises:

- Payment of travel allowances when billed on a per-mileage basis using HCPCS code P9603 and when billed on a flat-rate basis using HCPCS code P9604 for CY 2026
- Chapter 16, Medicare Claims Policy Manual, sections 60.1 and 60.2

More Information

We issued CR 14345 to your MAC as the official instruction for this change. For more information, find your [MAC's website](#).

Document History

Date of Change	Description
January 9, 2026	Initial article released.

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