



AAVBC

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF VALUE BASED CARE

ALS

Quick Reference Guide

2026

Table of Contents

1. CLINICAL SNAPSHOT	3
HCC/RAF V28 Mapping	4
2. RECOGNITION AND DIAGNOSIS	5
Medicare Screenings and Surveillance (Adult and Geriatric)	5
Subtle Early Signs	6
Geriatric Risk Factors	7
Diagnostic Thresholds	8
Other Core Testing	10
Staging: Prognosis/Trajectory	12
Clues to Dig Deeper	15
Common Oversights	15
Key Differentials in Elderly	16
Comorbidity Screening	17
3. MEAT DOCUMENTATION ESSENTIALS	21
Clinical Documentation Elements	22
Reframing Common Documentation Shortcuts	22
4. TREATMENT AND REFERRAL QUICK GUIDE	23
Therapy Escalation Criteria	23
AAN-Aligned Treatment and Multidisciplinary Care by Setting	25
Cost Savings for Home Ventilation	27
Non-Pharmacologic Care and Supportive Interventions	28
Medication Options, Safety, and Key Interactions	29
When to Refer	32
Follow-Up Timing	33
Comorbidity Management	34
Cost-Smart Options	35
Patient and Caregiver Education	36
Quality Metrics Tie-In	37
5. CODING REMINDERS AND CASE EXAMPLES	40
Coding Specificity	40
Annual Clinical Review and Confirmation	41
Good Documentation — EHR Tips	42
Brief Case Examples	42
REFERENCES	43

1 CLINICAL SNAPSHOT

Definition: Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) — also called Lou Gehrig disease — is a progressive, uniformly fatal neurodegenerative disease that destroys **upper motor neurons (UMN)** in the brain and **lower motor neurons (LMN)** in the brainstem and spinal cord, producing relentless **muscle atrophy, paralysis, and ultimately respiratory failure**.¹ Median survival from symptom onset is **2-5 years**, and **respiratory failure is the cause of death in up to 95%** of people living with ALS.² Approximately **90-95% of cases are sporadic** (unknown cause); **5-10% are familial**, with pathogenic variants in C9orf72, SOD1, TARDBP, and FUS among the most characterized.¹ ALS is not purely a motor disease: up to **50% of patients develop cognitive or behavioral changes**, and roughly **15% develop frontotemporal dementia (ALS-FTD)** — a finding routinely missed in primary care with profound implications for advance care planning and decision-making capacity.³

ICD-10 Codes:

Primary diagnosis: **G12.21** — Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis — is the specific code for confirmed ALS and should be documented whenever the phenotype is known. Document "amyotrophic lateral sclerosis" or "ALS" explicitly; both familial and sporadic ALS map to **G12.21** (there is no separate code), so record genetic testing results (SOD1, C9orf72, FUS, TARDBP) in the chart to support specialist referral and **tofersen** eligibility. Avoid **G12.20** (motor neuron disease, unspecified) once the ALS phenotype is confirmed — it was the default before ICD-10 carried a specific ALS code and forfeits clinical specificity. Related motor neuron disease codes (**G12.22** progressive bulbar palsy; **G12.23** primary lateral sclerosis; **G12.25** progressive spinal muscular atrophy) describe distinct phenotypes and should not substitute for **G12.21** when ALS is confirmed. Because ALS progresses rapidly, comorbidity codes for respiratory, nutritional, mobility, and cognitive status must be updated at every encounter.⁴

Prevalence and Burden: The CDC National ALS Registry estimated approximately **33,000 people living with ALS** in the United States in 2022 (prevalence **~9.9 per 100,000**), projected to rise more than 10% to **over 36,000 by 2030** as the population ages; in the Medicare Advantage population specifically, 5-year period prevalence has been reported at **20.5 per 100,000**.^{5,6} ALS incidence peaks between ages **55 and 75 years**, with a male-to-female ratio of approximately **1.2:1 to 1.5:1** for sporadic disease (1:1 for familial). The older population (>65 years) carries a disproportionate burden: in beneficiaries **≥65 years**, median time to diagnosis is **2.5 years for limb-onset** and **1.25 years for bulbar-onset**, and roughly **40% of Medicare ALS patients died within 1 year** of their first ALS diagnostic code or never saw a neurologist — with **25.5% dying within 6 months** — evidence of severe under-ascertainment in older adults.¹

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