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Consultations vs. Referrals — What's the Difference?

Coding for a **Consultation** vs. a **Referral** continues to baffle many physicians. Since consultation codes pay substantially more than a referral (new patient) visit, practices often play it safe by coding all such visits as a new patient visit, thereby missing out on the legitimate revenue they have earned for a consultation. On the other hand, depending on your specialty, billing too frequently for consultations is likely to flag you for an audit by Medicare and other payers.

So what's the difference?

A **Consultation** is a request by a physician for the advice or opinion of another physician regarding the evaluation and/or management of a specific problem.

A **Referral** is the transfer of care from one physician to a second physician when the second physician assumes responsibility for treatment of the patient.

Remember the **three Rs of consultations**, all of which must be documented in the patient's medical record:

- You must have received a written **Request** for consultation from the other physician.
- You must **Render** an opinion.
- You must send a written **Report** to the requesting physician.

