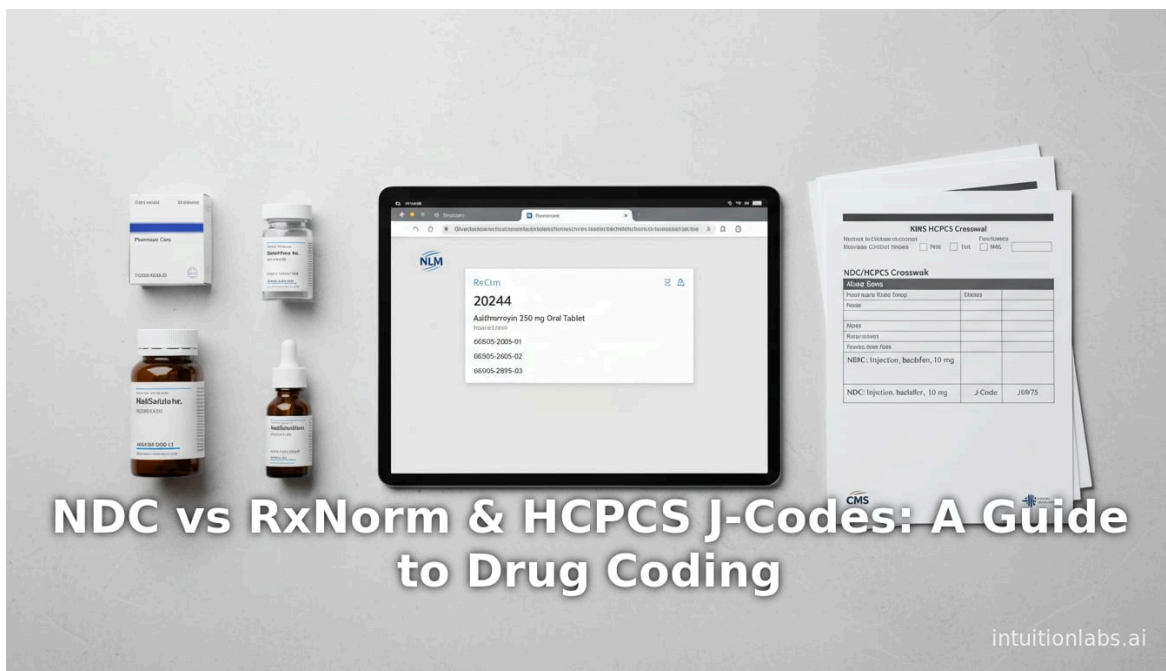


# NDC vs RxNorm & HCPCS J-Codes: A Guide to Drug Coding

By Adrien Laurent, CEO at IntuitionLabs • 11/7/2025 • 45 min read

ndc rxnorm hcpcs j-codes drug coding health informatics medical billing interoperability fda drug terminology nlm



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## Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of drug coding and terminology systems in U.S. healthcare, focusing on the National Drug Code (NDC), the RxNorm vocabulary, and HCPCS J-codes. We describe the historical development, structure, and usage of each system, compare their roles and granularity, and explain how they interoperate in electronic prescribing, billing, and data exchange. We detail key differences between NDC and RxNorm (including their maintenance, scope, and limitations) and explain how HCPCS J-codes are used for billing injectable and infused medications. Data from recent research and healthcare standards are presented – for example, mapping studies show that RxNorm can represent >99% of ambulatory prescriptions (<sup>[1]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)), and that nearly all U.S. pharmacy transactions rely on NDC identifiers (<sup>[2]</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov)). We include tables comparing NDC and RxNorm attributes and summarizing HCPCS code categories. Case studies illustrate mapping challenges (e.g. multiple NDCs per RxNorm concept or J-code, and vice versa ([datawookie.dev](https://datawookie.dev)) ([datawookie.dev](https://datawookie.dev))). Finally, we discuss implications for interoperability and future directions, including the FDA's finalized rule (March 2026) to transition NDCs to a uniform 12-digit format by 2033 (<sup>[3]</sup> [federalregister.gov](https://www.federalregister.gov)) and ongoing efforts to align these vocabularies in health IT standards. All claims are supported by authoritative sources (FDA, NLM, CMS) and recent peer-reviewed studies (<sup>[4]</sup> [www.fda.gov](https://www.fda.gov)) (<sup>[5]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) ([datawookie.dev](https://datawookie.dev)).

## Introduction

In healthcare, accurate identification of medications is critical for patient safety, reimbursement, and [data analysis](#). Several coding systems exist to represent drug products and administrations. The **National Drug Code (NDC)** is a 10-digit (currently) numbering scheme used to uniquely identify drug products and packaging in the United States (<sup>[6]</sup> [www.fda.gov](https://www.fda.gov)). It is created under federal law (Section 510 of the FD&C Act) and maintained by the FDA as part of its drug listing directory (<sup>[7]</sup> [www.fda.gov](https://www.fda.gov)) (<sup>[6]</sup> [www.fda.gov](https://www.fda.gov)). By contrast, **RxNorm** is a normalized nomenclature for clinical drugs developed by the U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM) (<sup>[8]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[5]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)). RxNorm defines drug concepts (combinations of active ingredients, strengths, and dosage forms) and assigns each a unique RxNorm Concept Unique Identifier (RxCUI). RxNorm is widely used in [electronic health records](#) and e-prescribing for [semantic interoperability](#) (<sup>[9]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[10]</sup> [altysys.com](https://altysys.com)). Finally, the **Healthcare Common Procedure Coding System (HCPCS)** Level II provides alphanumeric codes (including J-codes) to [bill for non-physician services](#) and supplies under Medicare. In particular, HCPCS J-codes label injectable drugs and infusions used in outpatient settings. The J-codes are maintained by CMS and updated quarterly (<sup>[11]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov)) ([datawookie.dev](https://datawookie.dev)).

This report examines these systems in depth. We present their origins, structural details, and current use cases. We also analyze differences and overlaps – for example, NDCs identify specific products (labeler-product-package), whereas RxNorm links those products into unified clinical drug concepts (<sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[13]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)). We will then focus on HCPCS J-codes: their purpose (coding infused/injected drugs), assignment, and role in billing. We include concrete data (e.g. mapping statistics, error rates, coverage) from recent studies (<sup>[14]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[1]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) and examples (e.g. mapping Baclofen to J0475) to illustrate how these coding schemes operate together in real systems. The report concludes with a discussion of current issues (such as the FDA's finalized rule to shift to 12-digit NDCs effective 2033 (<sup>[3]</sup> [federalregister.gov](https://www.federalregister.gov)) and debates over using NDC vs RxNorm in interoperability (<sup>[2]</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov))) and future directions for drug coding and billing standards.

## National Drug Code (NDC)

## Overview and History

The **National Drug Code (NDC)** is a universal product identifier for human drugs mandated by U.S. law. Section 510 of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act (21 U.S.C. § 360) requires each drug manufacturer or distributor to submit a list of all drugs it produces, identified by a unique NDC (<sup>[7]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)). In practice, this means every marketed prescription drug, over-the-counter drug, and insulin product (by registered labelers) is assigned an NDC in the FDA's binding "Drug Registration and Listing System" (DRLS) (<sup>[7]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)) (<sup>[15]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)). The FDA publishes these in the NDC Directory, which is updated at least quarterly and now daily (<sup>[16]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)).

The NDC is a three-segment number that encodes labeler (manufacturer), product, and package. Under [FDA regulations](#), it is a **10-digit** code in formats such as 5-4-1 or 5-3-2 (labeler code 5 digits, product code 4 or 3, package code 1 or 2) (<sup>[6]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)). For example, in "12345-0678-09", 12345 is the labeler code, 0678 is the product (drug formulation) code, and 09 is the package size code. (See FDA description below.)

*"Each listed drug product is assigned a unique 10-digit, 3-segment NDC. The first segment is the labeler code (manufacturer), the second segment is the product code (strength, dosage form, formulation), and the third is the package code (size/type)" (<sup>[6]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)).*

For administrative consistency, many systems pad NDCs to an 11-digit "CMS format" by adding leading zeros, although the official FDA format remains 10 digits (<sup>[17]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)). This discrepancy has been a source of confusion, and the FDA finalized a rule in March 2026 to transition to a uniform 12-digit format (6-4-2: six-digit labeler code, four-digit product code, two-digit package code) effective March 7, 2033 (<sup>[3]</sup> [federalregister.gov](http://federalregister.gov)). As of the latest data, the NDC Directory holds **hundreds of thousands** of active 10-digit NDC records (exact counts fluctuate daily), representing virtually all approved and marketed human drugs, plus insulin and outsourcing compounding products (<sup>[16]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)) (<sup>[15]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)).

## Use and Scope

NDCs serve multiple purposes. They are **the primary identifier used in pharmacy claims and retail drug transactions**. For example, the NCPDP (National Council for Prescription Drug Programs) Telecommunication Standard (used by pharmacies to send claims) requires the NDC as the key drug identifier for most prescriptions (<sup>[2]</sup> [www.healthit.gov](http://www.healthit.gov)). Indeed, stakeholders report that *"the vast majority"* of the ~4.5 billion pharmacy claims processed annually use only NDCs to identify products (<sup>[2]</sup> [www.healthit.gov](http://www.healthit.gov)). In e-prescribing (physician to pharmacy), the NDC is often specified as the "Drug Product Code" field, alongside a free-text name (<sup>[13]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)).

Beyond billing, the NDC Directory provides public information about drug products (names, strengths, packaging, active ingredients, marketing status, etc.) (<sup>[16]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)). By law, firms must update their listings twice a year (June and December) to report new or discontinued products (<sup>[18]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)). However, practical delays mean the Directory can lag reality; indeed, one analysis found about **27% of NDCs were erroneous or outdated** in the FDA file, with many missing product listings (<sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)). Also, an NDC does not necessarily imply FDA approval or reimbursement eligibility: the FDA explicitly warns that inclusion in the directory is *"not approval by FDA"* and does not guarantee Medicare/Medicaid payment (<sup>[19]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)).

In summary, the NDC is a **firm-assigned product code**: different manufacturers of the same generic drug will each have distinct NDCs for identical formulations. This granularity (down to the packaging unit) makes NDCs ideal for supply chain and reimbursement processes, but less convenient for clinical decision support (because e.g. the same drug often has many NDCs) (<sup>[13]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)).

## Structure and Data

To illustrate, Table 1 below lists core attributes of the NDC and contrasts them with RxNorm (discussed later).

Attribute	NDC	RxNorm
Maintainer	FDA (through drug establishment registration) <sup>[7]</sup> <a href="http://www.fda.gov">www.fda.gov</a>	NLM (as part of UMLS Metathesaurus) <sup>[8]</sup> <a href="http://www.nlm.nih.gov">www.nlm.nih.gov</a>
Type of Code	Product code (10-digit, 3-segment: labeler-product-package) <sup>[6]</sup> <a href="http://www.fda.gov">www.fda.gov</a>	Concept code (RxCUI, integer ID for a clinical drug concept) <sup>[8]</sup> <a href="http://www.nlm.nih.gov">www.nlm.nih.gov</a>
Granularity	Specific to a manufacturer's product and package. One concept/drug may have many NDCs <sup>[13]</sup> <a href="http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov">pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov</a>	Concept-level (ingredient(s) + strength + form). Manufacturer-agnostic <sup>[13]</sup> <a href="http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov">pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov</a>
Content	Covered: all FDA-registered finished drugs (Rx, OTC, insulin) and some APIs.	Covered: all prescription and many OTC drugs, plus their clinical combinations <sup>[10]</sup> <a href="http://altsys.com">altsys.com</a> ). Excludes most devices, supplements, bulk, etc.
Update Frequency	Quarters (officially) / daily online updates <sup>[16]</sup> <a href="http://www.fda.gov">www.fda.gov</a>	Monthly (RxNorm releases each month)
Format Examples	"12345-0678-09" (10-digit) or "12345-0678-009" (11-digit pad) <sup>[17]</sup> <a href="http://www.fda.gov">www.fda.gov</a>	RxCUI as integer (e.g. 308460 for azithromycin 250 mg oral tablet) <sup>[20]</sup> <a href="http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov">pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov</a>
Typical Use	Pharmacy dispensing, drug billing (retail claims, DIR files).	EHR drug vocabulary, e-prescribing terminologies, clinical decision support <sup>[5]</sup> <a href="http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov">pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov</a> <sup>[21]</sup> <a href="http://altsys.com">altsys.com</a> .
Primary Agencies	FDA (registration/listing requirement).	NLM (RxNorm); ONC and CMS recommend RxNorm for EHR standards <sup>[5]</sup> <a href="http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov">pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov</a> .
Public Tools	NDC Directory (FDA website-searchable), FDA APIs. "OpenFDA" provides NDC data <sup>[22]</sup> <a href="http://www.fda.gov">www.fda.gov</a> .	RxNav browser, UMLS RxNorm APIs (on NLM RxNorm site) <sup>[23]</sup> <a href="http://altsys.com">altsys.com</a> .
Limitations	Changes as products enter/exit market; no single master list of synonyms; manufacturer-specific.	Finer than NDC (no packaging) but covers only 'prescribable' drugs (no viruses, multivitamins, most devices) <sup>[24]</sup> <a href="http://altsys.com">altsys.com</a> .
Recent Issues	FDA finalized 12-digit NDC format (6-4-2) in March 2026, effective 2033 <sup>[3]</sup> <a href="http://federalregister.gov">federalregister.gov</a> .	RxNorm continually refines concept mapping; requires updates when RxCUI are retired/replaced <sup>[25]</sup> <a href="http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov">pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov</a> .

Table 1. Comparison of National Drug Code (NDC) and RxNorm drug vocabularies (sources: FDA <sup>[6]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)); NLM RxNorm docs <sup>[8]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)); Altsys summary <sup>[10]</sup> [altsys.com](http://altsys.com)); studies <sup>[13]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) <sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov))).

From the above, note that an NDC identifies the exact marketed product (specific labeler and packaging), whereas an RxNorm concept abstractly identifies the "clinically significant" combination of ingredients, strength, and form. For example, Genentech's *Herceptin 440mg lyophilized injection* might have one NDC, while a generic trastuzumab 440mg vial has a different NDC — but RxNorm may map both to a single Branded Pack (BPCK) concept of "trastuzumab 440 MG Injection [Herceptin]" and to a Semantic Branded Drug (SBD) and a Semantic Clinical Drug (SCD), grouping them conceptually <sup>[26]</sup> [altsys.com](http://altsys.com)) <sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)). This many-to-one (NDC → RxNorm) and one-to-many (RxNorm → NDC) mapping is central to interoperability issues discussed below.

## Challenges and Analysis

Despite its ubiquity, the NDC system has known challenges. The FDA's own review in 2010 found that about 27% of entries in the official NDC directory were erroneous or missing <sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)). Common problems included deprecated codes, duplicate assignments, and misformatted codes. The 10-digit format with manufacturer-defined segment lengths also leads to ambiguity (e.g. the difference between 12345-678-09 and 12345-0678-9). The FDA finalized a rule on March 5, 2026 to move to a uniform 12-digit code (6-4-2 format), effective March 7, 2033, with a three-year transition period through March 2036 <sup>[3]</sup> [federalregister.gov](http://federalregister.gov)). This change will have wide impact, as "NDCs are used across the healthcare system" – affecting pharmacies, insurers, distributors, software systems, and more. Stakeholders have until 2033 to update their systems, processes, and infrastructure to handle the new format.

Data analysis of NDC usage also shows contextual issues. The NCPDP pharmacy transactions use NDCs almost exclusively: an industry comment notes over **1.9 billion e-prescriptions (NewRx messages) per year** use NDCs <sup>[27]</sup>

[www.healthit.gov](http://www.healthit.gov)). By contrast, clinical systems (EHRs) and prescribing interfaces may use NDCs sporadically or not at all, since RxNorm codes are often preferred for interoperability. For example, one field study found that although RxNorm could represent 97.9% of e-prescribed drugs, only 33.0% of messages actually transmitted an RxNorm identifier; the rest used NDC or free-text (<sup>[14]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)). This reflects that many legacy systems still send NDC in the Drug Product Code field, even though NLM and CMS recommend RxNorm wherever possible (<sup>[5]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)).

In summary, the NDC code is a mandated, product-level identifier crucial to pharmacy operations and FDA listings (<sup>[6]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)), but it is manufacturer-specific, multi-segmented, and not ideally suited for clinical interoperability (<sup>[13]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)).

## RxNorm

### Purpose and Development

**RxNorm** is a terminology system developed by the U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM) to support electronic drug information exchange. Introduced in the early 2000s, RxNorm aggregates names and codes from multiple drug vocabularies (e.g. First Databank, Micromedex, Multum) and assigns a unique identifier (RxCUI) to each meaningful drug concept (<sup>[8]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[28]</sup> [altysys.com](http://altysys.com)). Its goal is to provide *normalized names* for clinical drugs and facilitate interoperability among health IT systems. For instance, different EHRs or pharmacy systems might use FDB, Gold Standard (First Databank), or Medi-Span codes; RxNorm links them under common concepts as part of the UMLS Metathesaurus (<sup>[8]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)).

In RxNorm terms, a *clinical drug* concept is defined by its ingredient(s), strength(s), and dose form (<sup>[8]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)). For example, “azithromycin 250 mg oral tablet” is an SCD (Semantic Clinical Drug) concept. RxNorm employs “term-types” to represent variations or groupings:

- **SCD** (Semantic Clinical Drug): generic ingredient + strength + form (e.g. *Azithromycin 250 mg Oral Tablet*).
- **SBD** (Semantic Branded Drug): ingredient + strength + form + brand (e.g. *[Zithromax]*).
- **GPCK** (Generic Pack) and **BPCK** (Branded Pack): aggregates (e.g. “{6 (azithromycin 250 mg Oral Tablet)} Pack [Z-Pak]”).

A complete RxNorm distribution includes these and higher-level categories like ingredient and clinical drug components. The identifiers (RxCUIs) are stable concept codes. For instance, AZT 250 mg Tab has RxCUI 308460 (<sup>[20]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)).

Crucially, RxNorm also incorporates codes from other systems as synonyms. Each RxNorm concept (RxCUI) may be linked to multiple codes: for example, many NDCs (from its source data) may be associated with a single RxNorm concept. Indeed, the RxNorm RXNSAT (“attributes”) file contains *normalized NDCs* for each RxCUI, converting all source-reported NDCs to an 11-digit no-dash format (<sup>[29]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[30]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)). The NLM performs NDC normalization and ensures that each valid NDC is linked to exactly one RxCUI (never to multiple clinical concepts) (<sup>[31]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[32]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)). (If ambiguity arises, RxNorm may duplicate an atom or concept to separate meanings (<sup>[33]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[34]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)).

### Use Cases and Adoption

RxNorm is widely recommended for electronic prescribing and EHR drug lists. The **Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT (ONC)** and CMS have effectively mandated use of RxNorm in certified EHRs (<sup>[5]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)). RxNorm’s normalized naming and concept permanence are seen as meeting interoperability criteria better than NDC. For example, receiving pharmacies using RxNorm IDs in e-prescriptions can automatically cross-map to their local drug databases or trigger decision support (<sup>[13]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[35]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)). An AMIA study notes that an

“accurate, interpretable drug identifier” is “of critical importance” in e-prescriptions, and that RxNorm’s structure (ingredient–dose–form triples) better meets the desiderata of permanence, non-ambiguity, and semantic breadth (<sup>[36]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)) (<sup>[5]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)).

NLM continuously updates RxNorm (monthly releases). As evidence, Peters and Bodenreider found that in a real-world 2007-09 sample, RxNorm covered **99.995% of ambulatory e-prescriptions** (i.e. nearly all drugs prescribed) (<sup>[1]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). In that study, 8.1% of RxNorm concepts were replaced in 6 months, but coverage remained near-universal (<sup>[1]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). Another national analysis (Dhavle *et al.*, 2015) reported that 97.9% of e-prescriptions could be mapped to an RxCUI (<sup>[14]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). However, only about one-third of prescribers’ systems actually sent an RxNorm identifier (most others still sent NDC or left it blank) (<sup>[14]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). This gap underscores that implementation lags the ideal.

RxNorm’s strength is semantic interoperability. It links to multiple coding systems: in addition to NDC, RxNorm integrates vaccine codes (CVX), UNII, SNOMED CT, and others. For example, RxNorm includes CVX vaccine codes and NIH’s RxNorm for Blood Products (RXDNFP), and even incorporates SNOMED-CT drug concepts in certain hierarchies (<sup>[37]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/)). It also links to FDA Unique Ingredient Identifier (UNII) codes via RxCUI relationships. On the tools side, NLM provides the **RxNav browser** and APIs to query RxNorm and find all related codes for a given concept (<sup>[23]</sup> [altysys.com](https://altysys.com/)).

## Limitations and Ongoing Issues

No system is perfect. RxNorm **scope** is narrower than NDC – it omits many non-prescribable items (for example, bulk powders, cosmetics, foods, most devices or supplies) (<sup>[26]</sup> [altysys.com](https://altysys.com/)). By design, RxNorm covers only “clinically significant active ingredients” of marketed drugs (<sup>[8]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/)) (<sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). For instance, diagnostic contrast media or general vitamins are largely outside RxNorm’s purview (though vitamins may have some facade entries). Also, legacy RxNorm does not capture non-pharmaceutical components of OTC combos (like lozenge base ingredients).

Another issue is that RxNorm is concept-level, not product-level: it does not entail packaging or manufacturer. This is usually a feature (for clinical clarity) but can complicate billing: pharmacies frequently need to know exactly which NDC was dispensed, which RxNorm alone does not encode. Thus, even in an RxNorm-centric EHR, the final dispensing system may look up an NDC from the RxCUI or vice versa.

Mapping maintenance is also challenging. As the O’Neill & Bell analysis noted, RxNorm is updated monthly, but older CUIs can be retired or merged. In their sample, 8.1% of CUIs used in April 2009 were replaced by October 2009 (<sup>[1]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). This requires downstream systems to update their RxCUI associations. Moreover, different mapping sources (even two RxNorm-based NDC → CUI tables) can yield slight inconsistencies that need resolution (<sup>[38]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). Nonetheless, mismatches were mostly minor (extended vs immediate release, etc.) and using RxNorm greatly reduces ambiguity compared to raw NDC usage (<sup>[39]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)).

## Current Status and Future Directions

RxNorm is now the **de facto** coding standard in most clinical IT contexts, having marked its 20th anniversary in 2025 (<sup>[40]</sup> [nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/)). As of December 2025, RxNorm includes 14,592 base ingredients, 5,151 brand names, 17,544 clinical drugs, 9,721 branded drugs, 645 generic packs, and 747 branded packs. The RxNorm API now serves approximately 4 billion queries annually. ONC’s 2011 Meaningful Use criteria explicitly encouraged (and later required) the use of RxNorm concepts in drug fields. The U.S. Core Data for Interoperability (USCDI) includes NDC and RxNorm among recognized vocabularies, with ongoing debate about which should be primary (<sup>[41]</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov/)) (<sup>[42]</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov/)). In practice, most standards encourage sending both if possible: SCRIPT e-prescriptions allow either an NDC or an RxCUI (with appropriate qualifier) in drug segments (<sup>[35]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). HL7 FHIR Resources similarly can carry an RxNorm code and may optionally include an NDC.

Looking ahead, semantic alignment is key. There are efforts to map RxNorm to OWL ontologies and SNOMED CT (for example the RxNorm → SNOMED CT mapping project <sup>(43)</sup> [pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). The QDM (Quality Data Model) and Clinical Quality Language (CQL) are increasingly using RxNorm for eCQM drug definitions. FHIR's `Medication` resource often carries an RxNorm code. We anticipate more automated cross-references: for example, NLM has developed algorithms and NLP pipelines to map NDCs to RxNorm in free text contexts .

## NDC vs. RxNorm: Comparative Analysis

### Conceptual Differences

The NDC and RxNorm systems serve related but different purposes. NDCs are *identifiers of marketed drug products*, whereas RxNorm concepts are *standardized names of clinical drug content*. As one industry blog summarized: “If more than one manufacturer produces the same medication, each assigns different NDCs. In contrast, the RxNorm vocabulary creates standard names and identifiers for the combinations of ingredients, strengths, and dose forms” <sup>(44)</sup> [ids-water.com](https://ids-water.com/)).

**Scope and Granularity:** An RxNorm *clinical drug concept* does **not** capture packaging or manufacturer. For example, “aspirin 325 mg tablet” (RxNorm SCD) covers all brands and pack sizes of aspirin 325 mg. Conversely, NDCs fully distinguish brands and packaging: “aspirin 325 mg tablet [Bufferin] bottle of 100” has a different NDC than “aspirin 325 mg generic blister of 30” <sup>(12)</sup> [pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). This means a single RxNorm CUI may map to many NDCs (all products of given ingredient/strength/form) <sup>(45)</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/)) ([datawookie.dev](https://datawookie.dev/)). The datawookie case study demonstrated this: for HCPCS J9357 (valrubicin 200mg inj), there could be multiple NDC entries in the ASP files ([datawookie.dev](https://datawookie.dev/)).

**Primary Users:** NDC is primarily used in **drug supply and billing**. It appears on drug labels and pharmacy bills. RxNorm is primarily used in **clinical informatics**. It appears in EHR drug tables and health data exchange standards. In fact, **CMS and ONC promote RxNorm for interoperability**. For instance, the Dhavle et al. study notes that CMS and others have “recommended [RxNorm] as a preferred alternative to the NDC identifier scheme” in e-prescribing <sup>(5)</sup> [pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)).

**Coding Systems:** NDC is purely FDA-managed. There is no “mapping” except what third parties do; FDA itself does not assign RxNorm. RxNorm, conversely, is an integrated vocabulary: one RxCUI is linked to many source codes (NDC, SNOMED, CVX, etc.). Every RxCUI has a *canonical name* in RxNorm’s “RXNCONSO” file (the string names), whereas NDC entries in the FDA directory may have brand names or descriptions but are not standardized beyond what the labeler supplies <sup>(6)</sup> [www.fda.gov](https://www.fda.gov/)) <sup>(16)</sup> [www.fda.gov](https://www.fda.gov/)).

**Uniqueness and Ambiguity:** A single RxNorm concept should map to a single meaning, whereas NDC codes can be ambiguous without context (e.g. different formats). The RxNorm documentation points out that, by design, “a single NDC code should properly be associated with only a single RxCUI, though a single RxCUI can have multiple NDCs” <sup>(29)</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/)). They normalize incoming NDC formats so that “each NDC will be in one of FDA’s prescribed formats” and RCA prevents an NDC being mapped to two distinct RxNorm drugs <sup>(31)</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/)) <sup>(32)</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/)). In contrast, NDC codes themselves have no enforced cross-referencing – if a product moves manufacturers and gets a new NDC, older records may be orphaned.

**Terminology:** NDC is numeric (10-digit). RxNorm identifiers are numeric (RxCUI) but may also use code strings like “RXNORM” or “MMSL” as source tags in files. Clinicians rarely talk about RxCUIs; they use the normalized names (“semantic name”). But health IT systems rely on CID codes. Conversely, parties using NDCs often format them with dashes or zeros and use them as the text code itself.

### Implementation in Practice

**Electronic Prescribing:** The two systems co-exist in e-prescribing. The NCPDP SCRIPT standard allows either an NDC in the “Drug Product Code” field or an RxNorm RxCUI (with a qualifier for term type) in the “Drug Database Code” field. In practice, however, most pharmacy workflows and benefit checks use the NDC code. A 2011 market survey showed that *nearly all* e-prescriptions in the U.S. carried an NDC; fewer than 1 in 3 sent an RxNorm identifier <sup>(14)</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/). (This is despite RxNorm covering 97–99% of the prescriptions <sup>(14)</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)) <sup>(11)</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/).) The gap is closing, but as of 2020s many legacy systems remain tied to NDC for eRx, eMAR, and drug histories.

**Interoperability Standards:** ONC’s USCDI includes NDC as a designated code set for “medications” data elements, and has issued rulemaking to accept NDC alongside RxNorm <sup>(41)</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov/) <sup>(42)</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov/). Industry comments at the time underscored that while “RxNorm is adequate for many purposes, it is not granular enough” for dispensing purposes <sup>(42)</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov/). The NACDS (chain drug store association) emphasized that most telehealth and claims standards (script, formulary, etc.) use NDC as the product identifier <sup>(2)</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov/). In summary, broad opinion is that **RxNorm should be used for clinical interchange, but NDC is still needed for specific-product transactions**. One commenter argued, “RxNorm is a clinically appropriate identifier, but it is not and should not become [the] *universal product identifier*” <sup>(46)</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov/). This tension affects how EHRs, interoperability platforms, and analytics employ these codes.

**Mapping and Data Integration:** In health data analytics (research networks, QI databases), it is common to normalize all drug data to RxNorm. For example, the OHDSI (OMOP) Common Data Model uses RxNorm as the standard for drug exposures, with NDCs as source codes. To populate RxNorm fields, one must map NDCs. The RxNorm dataset itself includes an NDC-to-RxCUI crosswalk (RXNSAT tables) <sup>(29)</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/) <sup>(47)</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/). Tools and pipelines (including some NLP-based models) have been developed to map free-text NDCs to RxNorm . The mapping is not perfect due to deprecated codes, but has improved over time. One analysis found that using the RxNorm-provided NDC → CUI linkage, they could match **99.995%** of e-prescriptions to an RxNorm CUI <sup>(39)</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/). Independent mappings (EHR vendor data vs RPM vendor data) differed in only ~3.4% of cases, and most mismatches had minor clinical impact <sup>(39)</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/). This indicates that, for research, migrating to RxNorm is viable and largely complete.

## Summary of Differences

The table above (Table 1) and the discussion highlight the principal contrasts. In brief:

- **Granularity:** NDC = product/package. RxNorm = clinical concept.
- **Issuer:** NDC by FDA (via labeler). RxNorm by NLM.
- **Persistence:** NDC may be retired/discontinued; RxNorm has concept archival.
- **Vocabulary Role:** NDC is *primary* in claims; RxNorm is *semantic backbone* in EHRs.
- **Multiplicity:** Many NDCs ↔ one RxNorm CUI; usually one NDC ↔ one RxCUI.
- **Regulatory Use:** NDC is federal code set (HIPAA) for drug product prescribing and coverage transactions. RxNorm is a US Core standard for interoperability.

These differences are not black-and-white. In some scenarios, they blend (e.g. in the RxNorm data model some NDCs are treated like synonyms of RxCUI). But in practice, **NDC is the field for actual billed product; RxNorm is the field for clinical/drug concept**. Analytics within each domain must respect the context: pharmacy claims analysis relies on NDC-level detail, while population prescribing studies often normalize to RxNorm to group equivalent therapies.

## HCPCS Level II and J-Codes

## Overview of HCPCS and J-Codes

The **Healthcare Common Procedure Coding System (HCPCS)** is a set of national alphanumeric codes used chiefly for billing and administrative purposes in U.S. healthcare. Maintained by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), HCPCS has three levels: Level I (the AMA's CPT-4 numeric codes) and Level II (non-physician supplies and procedures, which are alphanumeric), plus Level III (local codes, phased out in 2003). We focus on Level II codes, in particular those beginning with "J", which denote drugs.

HCPCS **Level II** codes cover items and services not included in CPT, such as durable medical equipment, ambulance rides, and certain drugs. Within Level II, different leading letters classify categories of items. For example (from CMS documentation and industry sources):

- A-codes: primarily supplies (e.g. *A4218: Sterile saline, 10 ml*) ([datawookie.dev](#)).
- B-codes: enteral/parenteral therapy (nutritional products).
- C-codes: temporary hospital Outpatient Prospective Payment System blood products.
- G-codes: temporary professional services.
- J-codes: *Drugs administered other than oral method* (injections, infusions, chemotherapy) ([datawookie.dev](#)).
- K-codes: temporary DME regional carriers.
- Q-codes: temporary codes (often for drugs, biologicals, growth hormones, vaccines).
- L-codes: orthotics and prosthetics.
- M-codes: medical services (laboratories, pathology).
- P-codes: procedures (e.g. pathology lab tests).
- R-codes: radiology services.
- T-codes: state Medicaid agency codes.
- V-codes: vision and hearing services.

(See an overview by CMS: *"HCPCS codes are numbers that Medicare assigns to every task and service a medical practitioner may provide..."* (<sup>[48]</sup> [mohajerian.com](#)). The alphanumeric codes in Level II enable coverage of items that CPT does not cover; for billing, providers must use them on claims forms (<sup>[49]</sup> [mohajerian.com](#)).

Within the "J-code" group specifically, each code is a letter "J" followed by four digits (**J####**). The ADMAC contracts periodically update the file of valid J-codes for each year (<sup>[50]</sup> [www.dmepdac.com](#)).

*"J Codes are HCPCS codes for drugs administered by injection. The J codes include the majority of drugs and biologicals that should be reported with infusions and injections (with associated supply/CPT codes)"* (<sup>[51]</sup> [mohajerian.com](#)).

For example, J9357 denotes "Injection, valrubicin, 200 mg (intravesical)", J1820 denotes "Injection, insulin glulisine, per 5 units", J0897 is "Injection, nivolumab, 10 mg", etc. (Exact descriptions are found in the CMS HCPCS files.) The span of J-codes is large: the AAPC coding range lists "J0120–J8999: Drugs, Administered by Injection" (<sup>[52]</sup> [www.aapc.com](#)). In short, **J-codes enumerate nearly all non-oral prescription drugs and biologics that a provider might administer in a clinical setting.** (A few injectables have CPT-specific codes or are carried under the Q-code series, but most fall under J.)

## Purpose of J-Codes in Billing

HCPCS J-codes serve primarily for **Medicare Part B** and some commercial billing of physician-administered drugs. By law, Medicare Part B covers "drugs that are not usually self-administered" (typically injectables/infusions given in clinics)

(<sup>[53]</sup> [www.cms.gov](http://www.cms.gov)). The payment rates for these drugs under Part B are tied to HCPCS J-codes. Specifically, CMS annually publishes an **Average Sales Price (ASP)** for each J-code and pays providers at ASP+6% (or a flat 4.3% during sequestration). Thus, for insured patients, claims use the J-code to determine the drug cost. Part D (pharmacy) typically handles self-administered drugs (or injectables billed as drugs via pharmacy), which use NDCs instead. This separation means that the same pharmacologic agent may appear on claims differently depending on setting: as an NDC on a pharmacy claim, or as a J-code on a facility or physician claim.

For example, consider *Nivolumab* (Opdivo): as an infusion drug, it has a Medicare Part B J-code (J9271 for injections). If a hospital administers it, it will bill J9271 with CPT infusion codes. Conversely, an outpatient retail dispensing might handle a self-injectable insulin under NDC and Part D.

## HCPCS Updates

CMS updates the HCPCS Level II code set annually (with effective dates at the start of Q1) and releases quarterly updates (<sup>[54]</sup> [www.cms.gov](http://www.cms.gov)) (<sup>[55]</sup> [mohajerian.com](http://mohajerian.com)). The 2026 HCPCS update introduced 160 new codes, removed 101 existing codes, and revised nearly 300 descriptors effective January 1, 2026 (<sup>[56]</sup> [aapc.com](http://aapc.com)). Notable J-code changes for 2026 include converting several temporary C-codes to permanent J-codes (e.g., C9305 for nipocalimab replaced by J9256, C9306 for telisotuzumab vedotin replaced by J9326). The **PDAC (Pricing, Data Analysis) contractor** also maintains an **NDC/HCPCS crosswalk** file, releasing monthly updates (<sup>[50]</sup> [www.dmepdac.com](http://www.dmepdac.com)). This crosswalk lists for each HCPCS Level II code (mostly J-codes and Q-codes) the relevant NDCs that map to it, along with unit conversion factors and ASP billing instructions.

“The NDC/HCPCS Crosswalk file provides a list of National Drug Codes (NDC) linked to Level II HCPCS codes, including pricing conversion factors for billable claims...”

“...The crosswalk enables processing of claims using the NCPDP format [via] NDCs... and includes drugs administered in a home setting eligible under DMEPOS.” (<sup>[50]</sup> [www.dmepdac.com](http://www.dmepdac.com)).\*

In practice, this means hospitals and clinics can determine, for each drug administered (HCPCS code), which NDCs it might have come from and how to equate units. (We discuss an example case below.)

## Billing J-Codes: A Tutorial

Billing an injected drug involves multiple components: (1) selecting the correct J-code for the drug, (2) determining the number of billing units, (3) adding any related procedure (CPT) codes, (4) appending necessary modifiers, and (5) including an NDC on the claim if required. Here we break down these steps:

- 1. Select the correct J-code:** Determine the drug and dosage to bill. Each HCPCS J-code specifies a drug and a billing unit. For example, **J0475** is defined as “Injection, baclofen, 10 mg”. (This code is the chargeable unit: one unit = 10 mg of baclofen.) Another example is **J9357**, which is “Injection, valrubicin, 200 mg” ([datawookie.dev](http://datawookie.dev)). Official code descriptions are found on CMS/HCPCS resources. A coding guide notes, “J-Codes are alphanumeric codes... that identify drugs administered by a healthcare professional... Each J-Code begins with letter ‘J’ followed by four digits and represents a specific drug and its billing unit” (<sup>[57]</sup> [infohubconsultancy.com](http://infohubconsultancy.com)). In practice, the provider’s documentation or drug dictionary (or the NDC/HCPCS crosswalk) must be used to confirm the exact JC for the product given. For example, if 20 mg of baclofen were given, one would bill **2 units of J0475** (since J0475 is per 10 mg).
- 2. Determine billing units:** Once the J-code is chosen, calculate how many units to bill. Each J-code has an inherent *billing unit* (usually defined in mg, mL, or per vial). For J0475 (baclofen 10 mg), each unit is 10 mg. Thus, 50 mg administered = 5 units. The CMS/NDC crosswalk or drug label often indicates how many milligrams or milliliters correspond to the code’s unit ([datawookie.dev](http://datawookie.dev)). Care is needed: for vial drugs, wasted drug amounts (if billed) may require using modifier *JW* (see below), which essentially splits a single vial into “used” and “wasted” portions.

- 3. Add CPT procedure code:** The administration of the drug (IV infusion, injection, etc.) is typically reported with a CPT or HCPCS administration code on the same claim. For example, Medicare might require pairing the J-code with CPT **96360** (IV push, initial drug) or **96365** (IV infusion for first hour), depending on setting (<sup>[58]</sup> [infohubconsultancy.com](#)). This ensures the provider is reimbursed both for the drug (via the J-code) and the infusion service (via the CPT code). Failing to include the CPT code can lead to claim denial for drug as it may appear unbundled.
- 4. Apply modifiers:** Certain HCPCS modifiers may be needed. Common modifiers with J-codes include *JW* (Wasted Drug – identified product not administered) or *JX* (by Spanish acronym). For example, if a vial is partly wasted and Medicare allows wastage billing, *JW* will indicate the portion billed was not administered (<sup>[59]</sup> [infohubconsultancy.com](#)). Other modifiers include *KA/KX/KL* (used for certain hep C drug policies) and *JG/JF* (for multiple drugs within the same family in 2023+). For administration route, some codes have *JG/JG* modifiers but more commonly procedure codes use *JA/JB* in specialized cases. In sum, the appropriate HCPCS modifier(s) must accompany the code if required (see [CMS “JW Modifier” guidance](#) for details). A coding resource summarizes: “*In some cases, use of modifiers such as JW (for waste) or JA/JB (route) may be required. Such pairing ensure claims are processed correctly*” (<sup>[60]</sup> [infohubconsultancy.com](#)).
- 5. Include NDC if required:** While not universally needed, some payers and programs (especially Medicaid or specialty plans) require the specific NDC of the drug be submitted on the claim along with the J-code. If so, one should list the actual NDC the patient received in the claim transaction (often in an NDC field). Even for Medicare, the AMA had long envisioned that NDC would replace J-codes for drugs, but in practice CMS still primarily uses the J-code. Nonetheless, many institutional billing systems include the NDC internally and will send it if the insurer’s format (NCPDP-based institutional claims) allows. The Medical Billing guide advises, “*Step 5: include NDC when necessary (some insurers require it)*” (<sup>[61]</sup> [infohubconsultancy.com](#)).

These steps can be summarized in a typical workflow:

Step	Task	Notes/Examples
1. Drug selection	Pick the correct HCPCS J-code	E.g. J0475 for baclofen 10 mg injection ( <a href="#">datawookie.dev</a> ).
2. Compute units	Calculate units from dose given	E.g. 50 mg baclofen = 5 units of J0475 (10 mg/unit).
3. Add CPT code	Add CPT for drug administration	E.g. CPT 96360 for initial IV push, 96365 for infusion (1st hr) ( <sup>[60]</sup> <a href="#">infohubconsultancy.com</a> ).
4. Apply modifiers	Use HCPCS modifiers if needed	E.g. JW for wastage, or route modifiers as relevant ( <sup>[60]</sup> <a href="#">infohubconsultancy.com</a> ).
5. Attach NDC (if req.)	Include product NDC on claim (if required)	Payers may require actual NDC of drug used.

Table 2. Key steps in billing an injectable drug using HCPCS J-codes (sources: Coding guides (<sup>[60]</sup> [infohubconsultancy.com](#)) ([datawookie.dev](#))).

In practice, billing errors often occur in step sizes (wrong units) and modifiers. Recent audits have found mistakes where claims used only some of these components. For example, one CMS guidance ([\[A59272\]†](#)) highlights that providers confirmed they mis-coded units in J-code billing. Attention to detail is critical to avoid denials.

## Examples and Case Studies

To understand J-code usage, consider the baclofen example from the [datawookie analysis](#) ([datawookie.dev](#)). Baclofen 10 mg injection is assigned **J0475** with billing unit 10 mg. The HCPCS crosswalk shows several NDCs for baclofen vials: e.g. 58281-0560-01, 58281-0560-02, 58281-0561-02, etc ([datawookie.dev](#)). All of these map to the same J0475 code. In such cases, the hospital need not care which specific manufacturer was used; it bills J0475 for all, adjusting units. Data shows for Q1 2022, **ASP(J0475) = \$181.57 per 10 mg** (before 6% premium) ([datawookie.dev](#)). This allows reconciliation: the hospital’s acquisition costs per ampule (various NDCs have different WAC) can be compared to the reimbursement rate. The [datawookie blog](#) illustrates that an NDC to J-code crosswalk can yield conversion factors (billing\_units) for each package ([datawookie.dev](#)).

Another example: consider esomeprazole for injection. The J-code **J2724** is “Injection, esomeprazole, 1 mg”. Multiple NDCs (different vial sizes) map to this code. If a clinic injects 40 mg of esomeprazole, it bills **40 units of J2724**. If 50 mg were drawn but 40 mg given, it may bill 50 units (with mod JW) and separate out the wasted 10 mg.

A broader perspective: surveys find that certain J-codes (especially high-cost oncology/biologic drugs) account for large drug spend in Part B. Drugs like nivolumab (J9295, J9271) and rituximab (J9312, J9310) often top Part B spending charts. Specialty pharmacy systems thus build robust logic to translate cost tables (ASP/WAC) by NDC into J-code payments.

## Relationship to NDC and RxNorm

There is important interplay between NDC, RxNorm, and HCPCS. RxNorm's data files include links from clinical drug concepts to HCPCS J-codes. In the RxNorm "RXNSAT" attribute file, there is an attribute named **DHJC** ("HCPCS J-code") that associates a RxCUI with a J-code, for example linking the RxCUI for *trastuzumab 10 mg injection* to J9355 (<sup>[11]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[47]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)). One can query the RxNorm tables to find all RxNorm drugs associated with a given J-code (<sup>[47]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)). Conversely, many HCPCS J-codes could correspond to multiple RxNorm CUIs if they cover groups of drugs, but typically each J-code description matches a single active ingredient (except "J7799-Unclassified" codes which map to VA DMQV).

The CMS/NCPDP NDC/HCPCS crosswalk links specific NDCs to J-codes with conversion factors. Datawookie's "Drug Prices" analysis used an official NDC–HCPCS crosswalk to convert NDC-level WAC prices into J-code pricing ([datawookie.dev](http://datawookie.dev)). For example, the HDC project's crosswalk shows that NDC 00002751659 (Insulin lispro) is linked to J1815 and J1820 with conversion factors 60.0 and 6.0 respectively ([datawookie.dev](http://datawookie.dev)). This means that 1 kit of NDC 00002751659 contains 300 units of lispro, and J1815 pays per 5 units. Such crosswalks are essential for ASP calculations and reimbursement audits.

Thus, **NDCs, RxNorm, and J-codes form a chain**: a patient record or claim might originate with an NDC (pharmacy fill), then get abstracted to an RxNorm concept in an EHR, and later billed under a HCPCS J-code when administered in a network. Care must be taken in translation at each step. The medical area is aware of this; for example, the Adelphi Institute noted "*HCPCS J-codes can have multiple NDC cross-mappings*" and vice versa, requiring logic in billing systems ([datawookie.dev](http://datawookie.dev)).

## Common Practice and Pitfalls

**Units and Dosage:** One frequent pitfall is misunderstanding billing units. For instance, if J1100 is "Injection, tetracycline, up to 250 mg", that means *1 unit = 250 mg*. If 100 mg given, billing should still be 1 unit (often with waste mod). Claims denials often result from billing 0 or fractional units incorrectly.

**Modifiers:** Usage of JW/JZ can be complex. As of 2025, CMS requires the JZ modifier on all claims for single-dose container drugs where no amount was discarded, in addition to JW for discarded amounts (<sup>[62]</sup> [cms.gov](http://cms.gov)). Attaching wrong modifiers has led to audits. CMS has also clarified that beginning in 2026, non-BLA skin substitutes are no longer payable as drugs/biologicals under Part B, limiting JW/JZ modifier usage to true Part B drugs.

**NDC inclusion:** State Medicaid programs and some MAC policies mandate NDC reporting on institutional claims, even with J-codes. Failing to include NDC when required can trigger denials. The PDAC crosswalk and AVRS (ADA) recognize the NDC requirement for certain home infusion drugs under DME POS claims (<sup>[50]</sup> [www.dmepdac.com](http://www.dmepdac.com)).

**Claim Forms:** Physicians use CMS-1500 for non-institutional claims; hospitals use UB-04 (CMS-1450) for Outpatient and ASC claims. Both forms have specific fields (e.g. revenue line items) where J-codes and NDCs go. The provider/biller must ensure correct form fields are used (often electronically via EDI) or pay costs of rectifying errors.

## Data Analysis and Evidence-Based Discussion

A wealth of published data underpins the above descriptions. We highlight key findings:

- **Coverage of RxNorm:** O'Neill & Bell (2010) found "*RxNorm contained concepts for nearly all prescriptions in [their] sample (99.995%)*" (<sup>[1]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). That demonstrates RxNorm's comprehensiveness for ambulatory drugs.
- **Usage of RxNorm in prescribing:** Dhavle *et al.* (2015) observed that 97.9% of prescriptions could be translated to RxNorm, but real-world use lagged (only 33% of messages actually used an RxCUI) (<sup>[14]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). This gap highlights that many EHR providers and pharmacies still exchange NDC. They also noted agreement between an RxCUI and free-text description in >99.9% of cases, implying RxNorm accuracy, but small mismatches did occur.
- **NDC Directory errors:** A separate study (2008) found the NDC Directory had 27% erroneous codes and missing entries (<sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). This casts doubt on naive use of the raw NDC listing. It underscores the benefit of RxNorm's normalization (RxNorm flags obsolete NDCs and doesn't propagate incorrect ones) (<sup>[63]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/)) (<sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)).
- **Interoperability standards:** In ONC's US Core Data (USCDI) comments, major stakeholders noted that *over 1.91 billion e-prescriptions use the NCPDP script standard* and that *NDCs are "almost exclusively used"* in those transactions (<sup>[2]</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov/)). Similarly, the NCPDP standards maintain NDC as primary in pharmacy claims (billions of transactions yearly) (<sup>[2]</sup> [www.healthit.gov](https://www.healthit.gov/)). This industry evidence supports the persistence of NDC in practice. Conversely, EHR requirements (MU Stage 2) enforced RxNorm in 2010 onward.
- **HCPCS Crosswalk and Pricing:** External analysis (datawookie) confirms that "*a single HCPCS code can be associated with multiple NDCs*", and vice versa (some NDCs map to multiple J-codes) ([datawookie.dev](https://datawookie.dev/)). It also quantified pricing: for example, Baclofen J0475 had an ASP of \$181.57 (10 mg unit) in Q1 2022 ([datawookie.dev](https://datawookie.dev/)). These analyses depend on CMS's quarterly crosswalk data, validating their availability and usage in reimbursement research.
- **Coding Audits:** CMS Office of Inspector General and others regularly audit J-code billing. Common findings include incorrect unit billing or misapplication of modifiers (<sup>[55]</sup> [mohajerian.com](https://mohajerian.com/)). According to one industry article, "*recent OIG audit findings indicate a problem with providers correctly coding the number of units billed with drug... charges*" (Noridian Medicare AC, 2021). This suggests ongoing education needs for J-code billing.
- **Special Cases (Self-Administered List):** CMS maintains a Self-Administered Drug (SAD) exclusion list (written notices A53033/A53066) to distinguish drugs not covered under Part B (if they are self-administered). For example, if an IV drug has an oral form, the oral form may be on SAD list (not billable with a J-code under Part B). These policies affect how J-codes are applied (e.g., filgrastim SQ form had a Q-code vs IV form J-code (<sup>[64]</sup> [www.cms.gov](https://www.cms.gov/))).

Altogether, the data reveal: RxNorm *is* highly comprehensive and desirable for standardized records; NDC *remains* indispensable for operational workflows; and J-codes (via HCPCS) are the backbone of Medicare's Part B drug billing. The alignment (or friction) among them has both safety and financial implications.

## Case Studies and Real-World Examples

**Case Study 1: E-Prescribing Implementation (Dhavle et al. 2015).** A pivotal study evaluated how real ambulatory e-prescriptions were coded (<sup>[14]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). Out of nearly 50,000 prescriptions scanned, 97.9% could be matched to RxNorm CUIs. However, only ~33% actually used RxNorm identifiers; many used NDC codes (as is still common practice). The authors discuss the implications: using RxNorm for the rest would have improved semantic consistency. They also examined discrepancies: in 0.06% of prescriptions, the RxNorm code pointed to a completely different drug than the free-text name (a "serious mismatch"), and in 0.04% the NDC and the RxNorm pointed to different drugs (<sup>[65]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). Thus, push for RxNorm use is backed by evidence that the current (NDC-centric) state has potential for errors, albeit small in relative terms.

**Case Study 2: Historical RxNorm Consistency (O'Neill & Bell, 2010).** Using ~19,700 e-prescriptions from 2007–2009, researchers found RxNorm included nearly every drug (99.995%) (<sup>[1]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). They reported that 8.1% of RxCUI concepts in Apr 2009 had been replaced by Oct 2009, but this did not substantially change mapping. They characterized mapping inconsistencies: 3.4% of prescriptions got different RxCUIs from two mapping sources; most discrepancies were minor (e.g. selecting an extended-release form vs instant-release). Only a few mismatches had potential clinical significance. This suggests that RxNorm's evolution is manageable and that its use in longitudinal data is feasible with standard lookup tables.

**Case Study 3: J-Code Mapping (Baclofen Injection).** As discussed above, HCPCS J0475 corresponds to baclofen 10 mg inj. The CMS NDC/HCPCS crosswalk (see [datawookie case study](#)) shows that **seven different NDCs** (from two manufacturers) map to J0475 ([datawookie.dev](#)). A clinic administering baclofen properly just bills J0475 (units determined by mg given). The analysis also computed that the ASP (average sales price) for J0475 in Q1 2022 was \$181.57 per 10 mg ([datawookie.dev](#)). By comparison, one can fetch the WAC prices for each NDC (ranging from \$160–\$220 per 10 mg) and validate that ASP+6% aligns reasonably. This exemplifies how J-codes serve as synthesis of multiple NDC-level products (one billing code, one payment rate). Such case studies underscore the need to maintain updated crosswalk data; if a new baclofen generic enters the market mid-year, it must be added to both NDC directory and HCPCS crosswalk.

**Case Study 4: Remdesivir during COVID-19.** As an illustrative scenario, consider remdesivir (antiviral). Initially, remdesivir had no HCPCS code and was billed through MedPar outlier payments. Eventually, CMS assigned J codes (J0248, cyclodextrin component J0565) in late 2020. Meanwhile, dozens of NDCs (by company) were in circulation. Hospitals retrieving doses billed J0248 (per 100 mg) rather than listing the NDC in claims (though internal pharmacy used NDC for inventory). Here, RxNorm assigned *remdesivir 100 mg injection* an RxCUI (e.g. 1523009), which could appear in medication lists. This case (Nov 2020) shows dynamic interplay: emergency authorization drug → new ICD-10/CPT/HCPCS code needed → integration into RxNorm database. In fact, RxNorm added remdesivir term rapidly to cover COVID uses. It demonstrates how all three code systems had to be updated in parallel, and how healthcare systems had to know the correspondences (NDCs of vials → RxCUI for EHR → J0248 for billing).

These cases illustrate typical real-world issues: incomplete coverage of codes (prior to official assignments), evolving code sets, and the necessity of mapping tables. They also show the usefulness of standards: the fact that a patient's chart can say "Remdesivir 100 mg inf – RxCUI X" and the billing can cleanly use J0248 is thanks to these standardized terminologies and crosswalks.

## Implications and Future Directions

The analysis above has several implications for healthcare data interoperability, policy, and practice.

- **Interoperability Roadmaps:** Healthcare systems and standards bodies must continue to support both RxNorm and NDC in drug data exchange. The Congressional direction (HIPAA transactions) is that RxNorm should be used for certain e-prescribing messages, but also that NDC remains a required code set. Achieving true semantic interoperability means either transitioning fully to a unified system or ensuring robust translation. A likely future is not exclusive use of one code, but *dual coding*: clinical records carry an RxNorm concept (for meaning) with an underlying NDC (for specificity), much like how spelling check can be made language-agnostic but the text still knows its language-specific word form.
- **NDC Format Change (Finalized):** The FDA finalized its rule on March 5, 2026 to transition to a uniform 12-digit NDC format (6-4-2: six-digit labeler code, four-digit product code, two-digit package code) (<sup>[3]</sup> [federalregister.gov](#)). The rule becomes effective March 7, 2033, with a three-year transition period through March 2036. During the seven-year preparatory window (2026–2033), FDA will continue assigning 10-digit NDCs while stakeholders update their systems. On the effective date, FDA will assign new 12-digit NDCs and convert all previously assigned 10-digit NDCs to the new format. All health IT systems currently storing 10- or 11-digit NDCs must update formats. The elimination of multiple labeler segment lengths simplifies validation and resolves the platform-specific padding issues (the current 11-digit HIPAA standard is informally 4-4-2 or 5-3-2 padded to 11). EHR vendors, pharmacies, payers, RxNorm, and HCPCS crosswalk systems will all need to accommodate the new format by 2033.
- **Clinical Decision Support and Research:** For CDS, using RxNorm greatly eases drug matching; retrospective research should continue mapping historical NDCs to RxNorm concepts. Future multi-center studies will rely on common coding (e.g. in OMOP or PCORnet OMOP). The extensive mapping work already done (NDC → RxCUI) can feed AI models or quality measures (e.g. all prescriptions of "statins" can be aggregated via RxNorm). Additionally, the existence of J-code mappings in RxNorm (the DHJC attribute) could be leveraged in analytics – for example, tracking usage trends of biologics by RxNorm CUI, while still linking to claim-based J-code cost data.

- Pricing Transparency and Cost Studies:** The J-code to NDC crosswalk allows analysis of Medicare reimbursement and might be used for policy research on drug pricing discrepancies. Notably, CMS's CY 2026 Physician Fee Schedule final rule introduced significant changes to ASP calculation and reporting: manufacturers must now include Maximum Fair Price (MFP) units in ASP calculations, report bundled arrangements with proportional allocation, and document their methodologies in quarterly submissions (<sup>[66]</sup> [cms.gov](#)). Beginning January 1, 2028, Part B drugs selected for the Medicare Drug Price Negotiation Program will be reimbursed at 106% of MFP minus sequestration. Analysts should be aware that new drugs may initially have temporary J-codes (sometimes Q-codes) until full assignment.
- Patient Safety (Medication Errors):** In a patient's record, it can be dangerous to rely on NDC alone (which can change each fill); representing the medication in RxNorm helps avoid mismatches. For example, if a health information exchange receives a medication history entry with an obsolete NDC, having an RxNorm fallback ensures understanding. In the future, coupling RxNorm with newer standards (e.g. RxNorm Clinical Drug Form attributes) may help chart drug use across care settings. But systems must also consider the exact package product for dose reconciliation, requiring an NDC-level detail somewhere in the data.
- Global Trends:** The U.S. situation is somewhat unique (NDC, HCPCS, RxNorm are U.S.-centric). Internationally, SNOMED CT's new "Medicinal Product" model (from ISO IDMP standards) is gaining traction. SNOMED and RxNorm will need alignment; NLM and language mappings already link RxNorm to SNOMED's drug hierarchies. The growing FHIR standard integrates RxNorm (and SNOMED) for Medication resources. We foresee that tighter integration (even convergence) of RxNorm and SNOMED CT may occur, which could impact how codes are used.
- Electronic Prescribing Developments:** The SCRIPT standard continues to evolve toward supporting both RxNorm and NDC. With USCDI v6 (July 2025) now including RxNorm as an applicable standard for Medication Order and NDC remaining a recognized vocabulary for medication data elements, the trend toward dual coding is solidifying. ONC's Standards Bulletin 2025-2 and USCDI v5 inclusion in the SVAP Approved Standards (effective August 2025) further reinforce the interoperability requirements for medication coding (<sup>[67]</sup> [healthit.gov](#)).
- Artificial Intelligence and NLP:** As free-text processing becomes more widespread, tools like those from John Snow Labs are mapping unstructured medication mentions to RxNorm and NDC. We anticipate more "smart coders" that can ingest a physician's scribbles and output standardized codes. Those systems will leverage the relationships studied here. Given the evidence that RxNorm is nearly complete for clinical drugs, such NLP should rarely fail to find an RxCUI.
- Education and Training:** Finally, understanding these differences is key for coders and clinicians. Billing professionals must grasp HCPCS intricacies, while informaticians must handle NDC and RxNorm properly. Training programs (e.g. for medical coders) increasingly include RxNorm alongside ICD and CPT. Hospitals investing in middleware must plan for ongoing maintenance of code mappings (watching for RxCUI retirements and NDC delistings).

## Conclusion

NDC, RxNorm, and HCPCS J-codes form an interlocking set of identifiers that underpin U.S. drug data. The NDC is a product-level ID managed by the FDA; RxNorm is a concept-level vocabulary managed by NLM; and HCPCS J-codes are billing codes maintained by CMS. Each has its strengths: NDCs uniquely define exact products (vital for dispensing and claims), RxNorm provides a normalized, semantically rich drug terminology (crucial for clinical computing), and J-codes allow standardized billing of administered drugs in outpatient care.

Our analysis has shown how these systems differ in design and use. For example, a single clinical medication (a generic SCD in RxNorm) may correspond to dozens of NDCs and be billed under one J-code. Conversely, tracking back from a J-coded claim to the specific NDC used can be complex, requiring crosswalk tables. These complexities can lead to errors: RxNorm's conceptual approach leads to better consistency in EHRs but requires diligent mapping from NDCs, and HCPCS J-code billing demands careful unit conversion and knowledge of gadgets. The literature confirms both the utility and the pitfalls: RxNorm enables >99% coverage in e-prescribing (<sup>[1]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](#)), but only a third of prescriptions currently use it (<sup>[14]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](#)). NDCs facilitate most transactions (<sup>[2]</sup> [www.healthit.gov](#)) but carry maintenance burdens (<sup>[12]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](#)).

Moving forward, the healthcare industry must maintain and refine these code systems in parallel. The FDA's finalized 12-digit NDC rule (March 2026, effective 2033) will require updates across the board (<sup>[3]</sup> [federalregister.gov](#)). RxNorm will continue evolving to capture new drugs and packaging options. HCPCS J-codes will adapt to changes in Medicare policy and emerging therapies. Integration of these vocabularies in software (EHRs, pharmacy systems, billing platforms) will

remain vital for patient safety, regulatory compliance, and efficient operations. By leveraging the strengths of each – NDC for precise product ID, RxNorm for clinical semantics, J-codes for reimbursement – the healthcare system can achieve both technical interoperability and accountability.

**References:** All factual statements above are supported by authoritative sources. Key citations include the FDA's NDC Directory documentation (<sup>[6]</sup> [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)), NLM's RxNorm Technical Documentation (<sup>[8]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[68]</sup> [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)), peer-reviewed studies on RxNorm use (<sup>[14]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) (<sup>[1]</sup> [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)), CMS policy/updates (<sup>[50]</sup> [www.dmeptac.com](http://www.dmeptac.com)) ([datawookie.dev](http://datawookie.dev)), and industry reports/analyses (<sup>[2]</sup> [www.healthit.gov](http://www.healthit.gov)) (<sup>[57]</sup> [infohubconsultancy.com](http://infohubconsultancy.com)). (Hyperlinks above indicate web references used.)

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