

Physical Therapy: An Underutilized Tool in the Fight Against Opioid Misuse



The ongoing opioid crisis in the U.S. has led to a growing realization that current pain management strategies have to change. Prescription opioids – which mask, rather than treat the underlying cause of pain – have contributed to widespread opioid misuse and addiction in communities throughout the U.S. **Physical therapy is a clinically proven, cost-effective pain management alternative that should be leveraged earlier and more often to prevent opioid misuse and addiction.**

Combatting Opioid Misuse Requires a New Approach to Pain Management

- Chronic pain—defined as pain lasting longer than 3 months—affects approximately **100 million American adults** and the economic costs attributable to such pain approach **\$600 billion annually**.
- Since the mid-1990s, the healthcare system has employed an approach to pain management that focuses on pharmacologically masking pain, rather than treating its underlying cause.
- This strategy has resulted in a dramatic increase in prescribing opioids, which in turn has resulted in widespread opioid misuse and addiction.

“Physical therapists are well-positioned to change the culture around pain management.”

**- U.S. Surgeon General
Jerome Adams, MD, MPH**

Benefits of Physical Therapy As a Pain Management Alternative

- Unlike prescription opioids, **physical therapy prevents and treats the underlying cause of pain**: A number of studies show the efficacy of physical therapist interventions in preventing, minimizing, and, in some cases, eliminating pain.
- **Physical therapy is clinically proven to improve function and mobility**. In its Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends physical therapy as an alternative to opioids for the treatment of chronic pain. The CDC notes that PT is especially effective at reducing pain and improving function in cases of low back pain, fibromyalgia, and hip and knee osteoarthritis.
- Physical therapy – particularly when accessed early in treatment – reduces reliance on prescription opioids and lowers the associated risk of opioid misuse. **Early physical therapy appears to be associated with subsequent reductions in longer-term opioid use and lower-intensity opioid use** for all of the musculoskeletal pain regions examined.
- **Physical therapy also reduces overall healthcare costs**. Research has demonstrated that when a patient in pain receives early access to a physical therapist, the patient experiences improved functional outcomes with a significant reduction in overall costs, as well as a lower probability of having an opioid prescription.