

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

- According to the CDC, more than 1-in-5 adults – or 50 million Americans – are affected by chronic pain. 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 focused on pharmacologically masking pain, rather than treating its underlying cause. The dramatic increase in opioid prescription has fueled a **deadly addiction and overdose epidemic**.
- From 1999 – 2018, **almost 450,000 people died** from an opioid overdose, according to the CDC. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, **overdose deaths have skyrocketed to record highs**, underscoring the importance of non-opioid pain management options.

“Biden believes we need to pursue two joint goals: eliminate overprescribing of prescription opioids for pain, and improve the effectiveness of and access to alternative treatment for pain.”

- The Biden Plan to End the Opioid Crisis

Benefits of Physical Therapy As a Pain Management Alternative

“Too many American families and communities have been devastated by the opioid crisis.”

- Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA)

- 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 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.