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HEALTHCARE

Insights

PHYSICAL THERAPY

An Alternative to Opioids
for Pain Management



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Back in 2016, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) published guidelines for prescribing opioids. It was a direct response to the growing concerns of opioid abuse—concerns that continue today, with millions of Americans being treated for chronic pain with prescription opioids. Within workers’ compensation, opioids make up more than 25% of drug claims, creating a crisis for doctors, employers, payers and, most importantly, injured workers.¹

Pain management is always a balancing act, and when properly prescribed, opioids can play an appropriate role. While changes need to be made in the prescribing of opioids, we have to ensure there are alternatives in place to help patients heal. Fortunately, the CDC’s guidelines also outline suggestions for treatment without opioids, citing physical therapy as one of the preferred methods for treating chronic pain.²

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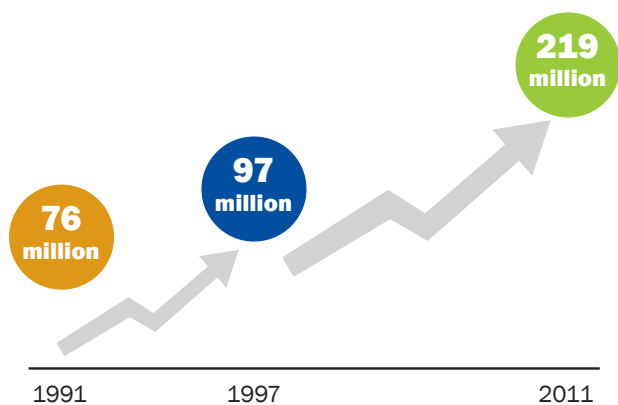
The Balancing Act

Many might be tempted to revert back to a time before opioids ruled the pain management scene. However, things were dire for a different reason. For decades, pain was undertreated, forcing patients to live with chronic, unmanaged pain. It wasn’t until 2000 that The Joint Commission (formerly the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations) introduced standards to help alleviate pain in

patients, including a 10-point scale to measure it. As acceptance of these standards became widespread, the emphasis in treatment shifted to managing patients’ reported pain with opioids.^{3, 4} It seemed those living with pain might finally have a solution.

It was a shift made with the best of intentions, but by the time The Joint Commission’s standards were introduced, the U.S. was already primed for an opioid crisis. Since the late 1990s, pharmaceutical companies had been reassuring the medical community that patients would not become addicted to opioid pain relievers. Healthcare providers were already prescribing them at greater rates. Between 1991 and 1997, the number of opioid prescriptions dispensed by U.S. retail pharmacies increased from 76 million to 97 million. By 2011, this number increased to 219 million.⁵

Number of opioid prescriptions dispensed by U.S. retail pharmacies



When the CDC released its guidelines in 2016, it indicated that more than 11.5 million Americans ages 12 and older reported misusing prescription opioids. By 2017, approximately 68% of the more than 70,000 overdose deaths in the U.S. involved opioids.¹ We need to rethink how we treat chronic pain, and prescription opioids cannot continue to be the emphasis.



Physical Therapy as a Preferred Treatment

In 2018, The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) published *Beyond Opioids: How Physical Therapy Can Transform Pain Management to Improve Health*.⁶ It argues that to treat chronic pain (and end the opioid crisis), we need collaboration among patients, families, providers, payers, and professionals across the continuum of healthcare settings—but physical therapists are at the center of it.

Everyone experiences pain differently, and pain tolerance varies widely from patient to patient. When a physical therapist works with someone who has chronic pain, they can identify risk factors such as disease history, psychological factors, perception of pain, and lifestyle habits. Most importantly, though, they can establish an individualized treatment plan—specific to that patient’s experience—that addresses both the physical impairments as well as the risk factors.⁶

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Treatment plans can include:

- **Exercise:** Addresses poor conditioning, impaired strength, or musculoskeletal imbalances that may contribute to pain.
- **Manual Therapy:** Hands-on manipulation of joints and soft tissue to moderate pain, reduce swelling and inflammation, and improve mobility.
- **Stress Management:** Using biofeedback and training in relaxation and visualization techniques to help reduce pain and improve function.
- **Sleep Hygiene:** Education and awareness, as well as improvement seen with increased activity and function, to help reduce pain sensitivity levels.
- **Pain Neuroscience Education:** Awareness of the mechanisms and contributors of pain can assist in understanding of the pain process and decrease dependence on opioids.

We’ve come a long way in pain management. When we found that patients were being forced to live with chronic pain, the medical community came together to offer a solution. Now, in the midst of an opioid crisis, we need another. Addressing it is no easy task and has no singular answer. But it’s clear that physical therapists have a key role to play in pain management.

References

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