

# OPIOID ABUSE AND THE ROLE OF PHYSICAL THERAPY

## THE PROBLEM

The problem of prescription opioid abuse and addiction across the United States has grown to epidemic proportions. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more people died from drug overdoses in 2014 than any other previous year, and of those deaths at least half involved a prescription opioid. Other alarming statistics about opioid abuse:

- According to data collected by the CDC, as many as 1 in 4 people who receive prescription opioids long-term for noncancer pain in primary care settings struggles with addiction.
- People who are addicted to prescription opioids are 40 times more likely to become addicted to heroin.
- In 2012, health care providers wrote 259 million prescriptions for opioid pain medication, enough for every American adult to have their own bottle of pills.
- More than 165,000 persons in the United States have died from opioid pain-medication-related overdoses since 1999.

## CDC GUIDELINES

In March 2016, the CDC released guidelines for prescribing opioids for chronic pain. In that guideline the CDC makes it clear that nonpharmacologic alternatives to prescription opioids, such as physical therapy, are the preferred option for treating chronic pain.

“Nonpharmacologic therapy and nonopioid pharmacologic therapy are preferred for chronic pain,” the CDC states in its first recommendation. “The contextual evidence review found that many nonpharmacologic therapies, including physical therapy, weight loss for knee osteoarthritis, psychological therapies such as [cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT], and certain interventional procedures can ameliorate chronic pain.”

## APTA'S POSITION

Physical therapists (PTs) are evidence-based health care professionals who provide cost-effective treatment that improves mobility and reduces pain and the need for long-term use of prescription drugs. APTA agrees with the CDC's position that nonpharmacologic therapy, such as physical therapy, is the best first choice to reduce pain and improve function. Physical therapists play a crucial role in pain management and can provide services in conjunction with opioids, if necessary. Physical therapy is a safe and effective alternative to opioids for long-term pain management. Physical therapists are movement experts who treat pain through movement, rather than just masking the sensation of pain.

There is a need to raise awareness among consumers and prescribers of the problem at hand and of the alternatives they have to prescription opioids. To address the issue, APTA created its #ChoosePT public education campaign ([www.MoveForwardPT.com/ChoosePT](http://www.MoveForwardPT.com/ChoosePT)) to raise awareness of the dangers of prescription opioids, and to highlight physical therapy as a safe alternative.

Additionally, APTA has begun to work with congressional offices to reiterate physical therapy's importance in the treatment of chronic pain. APTA is supporting the John Thomas Decker Act (HR 4969), which would direct the CDC to make materials available to student athletes, parents, guardians, and coaches of student athletes about opioid pain medications and the dangers they pose, as well as alternative forms of treatment. APTA's President Sharon Dunn, PT, PhD, OCS, wrote a letter of support to Rep. Pat Meehan's office outlining the importance of educating our youth about the dangers of these medications and about locating alternative forms of treatment, such as physical therapy, to relieve pain from injury.

## POLICY SOLUTIONS TO ENSURE IMPROVED ACCESS TO PHYSICAL THERAPIST SERVICES FOR ALL PATIENTS

- Repeal the Medicare therapy cap.
- Remove restrictions at the federal and state levels to improve patient access to physical therapists.
- Ensure comprehensive insurance coverage for services provided by physical therapists.
- Provide for fair PT copays under insurance.
- Allow PTs to perform to the full extent of their education and training.
- Protect patient choice of their physical therapist.



American Physical Therapy Association

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# FACTS ABOUT PHYSICAL THERAPISTS AND PHYSICAL THERAPIST ASSISTANTS



## WHO WE ARE

Physical therapists (PTs) are health care professionals who diagnose and treat individuals of all ages, from newborns to the very old, who have medical problems or other health related conditions that limit their ability to move and perform functional activities in their daily lives. PTs also work with individuals to prevent the loss of mobility before it occurs by developing fitness- and wellness-oriented programs for healthier and more active lifestyles.

Physical therapist assistants (PTAs) provide selective physical therapy interventions under the direction and supervision of physical therapists.

## WHAT WE DO

PTs examine each individual and develop a plan of care using treatment techniques to promote the ability to move, reduce pain, restore function, and prevent disability. Under the direction and supervision of the PT, PTAs provide selective physical therapy interventions based on the developed plan of care.

## WHERE WE PRACTICE

PTs and PTAs provide care for people in a variety of settings, including outpatient clinics or offices; inpatient rehabilitation facilities; skilled nursing, extended care, or subacute facilities; education or research centers; schools; hospices; industrial, workplace, or other occupational environments; and fitness centers and sports training facilities.

## EDUCATION & LICENSURE

All PTs must receive a graduate degree from an accredited physical therapist program before taking a national licensure examination that permits them to practice. The majority of programs offer the Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree. State licensure is required in each state in which a PT practices. PTAs must complete a 2-year associate's degree and are licensed, certified, or registered in most states.

## AMERICAN PHYSICAL THERAPY ASSOCIATION

The American Physical Therapy Association ([www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org)) is a national organization representing more than 90,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students nationwide. Its goal is to foster advancements in physical therapist education, practice, and research.

## CONTACT INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

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