

The Opioid Epidemic: What PTs and PTAs Need to Know



Every year millions of Americans use opioids to manage pain. Doctor-prescribed opioids are appropriate in some cases, but they just mask the pain—and reliance on opioids has led to the worst drug crisis in American history.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends safe alternatives like physical therapy for the management of most non-cancer-related pain.

Physical therapists (PTs) and physical therapist assistants (PTAs) have a responsibility to understand the full scope of the epidemic and its potential impact on their patients and clients.

4 Things You Must Know:

- 1. The CDC recommends nonopioid approaches for chronic pain.** In March 2016, CDC released guidelines urging clinicians to consider opioid therapy “only if expected benefits for both pain and function are anticipated to outweigh the risks to the patient.” Before prescribing opioids, providers are encouraged to check that nonopioid therapies have been tried and optimized. In cases when opioids are prescribed, providers are encouraged to “start low and go slow” with dosing and to combine with nondrug approaches like physical therapy. Cancer treatment, palliative care, end-of-life care, and certain acute care situations are cited as cases in which properly dosed opioid therapy may be appropriate.
- 2. The opioid epidemic doesn't discriminate.** Virtually every age, gender, race, socioeconomic group, and community in the nation has been impacted by the opioid crisis. According to CDC, nearly 50 people die every day from overdoses involving prescription opioids. In 2017, the US Department of Health and Human Services declared the opioid epidemic a public health emergency.
- 3. APTA's opioid awareness campaign provides resources for patients and clients.** APTA's national campaign raises awareness about the risks of opioids and the safety and effectiveness of physical therapy for pain management. Resources include a downloadable pain assessment that patients can use to facilitate treatment conversations with their health care providers. Direct your patients and clients and prescribers to ChoosePT.com. Explore the site and access the online tool kit to help promote the campaign and educate your patients and community.
- 4. APTA's PTNow website includes resources for clinicians.** To access evidence-based resources on the treatment of pain and chronic conditions, visit PTNow.org/Opioid.

Opioid Awareness Checklist

In your practice, do you...

- Educate your patients and clients about the dangers of opioids?
- Set realistic goals for pain and function based on the diagnosis?
- Listen closely to your patients and clients describing their pain to ensure they feel heard, and to detect signs of depression or concerning behaviors
- Ask about past or present problems with substance abuse or addiction?
- Ask if there is a family history of substance abuse or addiction?
- Refer your patients and clients if you suspect a substance abuse or addiction problem?

All opioid statistics via the CDC.

To find more information and a physical therapist in your area, visit ChoosePT.com.

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