

Taking Actions to Curb the Opioid Epidemic

The APTA has advocated physical therapy management as effective and safe for pain relief in lieu of opioids. There are many ways that physical therapy professionals can be involved in curbing the current opioid epidemic within our society. The direct use of physical therapy management for pain relief is one example of this role. This article aims to outline five practices that physical therapy professionals can implement to be part of the solution:

1. Know and use the appropriate language regarding substance use disorder. The language we use to describe substance use, the people who engage in it, and the treatment options available for their support has a direct impact on the way others view and treat them. It is recommended that “substance use” be used to describe all substances, including alcohol and other drugs. Check out the NIH site for more information:

- <https://www.drugabuse.gov/nidamed-medical-health-professionals/health-professions-education/words-matter-terms-to-use-avoid-when-talking-about-addiction>

2. Provide an annual physical therapy visit for community members. This regular contact with your community provides an opportunity for you to advocate for direct access to physical therapy services to treat pain. This also serves as an opportunity to identify individuals who are currently taking medications for pain relief. This could lead to a referral to another provider based upon screening results or a referral for PT services. The APTA advocates an Annual Physical Therapy visit, read more here:

- <https://www.apta.org/patient-care/interventions/annual-checkup>

3. Learn about Naloxone administration and get trained to provide this life-saving treatment. The APTA’s official position is that naloxone should be available where PT services are provided. When administered this medication reverses the effects of an opioid overdose. This is in alignment with recommendations from the Surgeon General of the United States who has encouraged APTA members to be trained in the administration of this life-saving medication.

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- <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/opioids-and-addiction/naloxone-advisory/index.html>
- <https://www.apta.org/news/2019/01/24/no-bigger-fan-us-surgeon-general-believes-the-physical-therapy-profession-is-a-key-player-in-the-fight-against-opioid-misuse>

4. Monitor and encourage appropriate consumption of prescribed opioid medication. Identification of opioid misuse is necessary to prevent or sometimes slow disease progression. With this information, appropriate referrals, interdisciplinary communication, and community resources should be utilized. Due to the complex nature of persistent pain and opioid use disorder, multi-disciplinary and community collaborations are often warranted. The CDC provides a number of resources to assist clinicians in monitoring the appropriate consumption of opioid medications.

- <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/providers/pdmpps.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/opioids/providers/prescribing/guideline.html>

5. Know & encourage safe disposal of unused opioid medications. Many opioid addictions begin by accessing unused opioid medications of family members or friends. Many people retain opioid medications and [medication sharing is common](#). Patients should be educated on the dangers of non-prescribed opioid use, and they should have information available regarding medication disposal options. The FDA provides information for the safe disposal of unused opioid medications:

- <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/safe-disposal-medicines/safe-opioid-disposal-remove-risk-outreach-toolkit>

Physical therapy professionals serve an integral role in treating and preventing pain. The opioid epidemic is partly due to a nationwide effort to help people better manage pain. Unfortunately, the health care system in the United States has focused on pain management from a pharmacologic, opioid-centric approach. A number of options for pain management exist, and now is an apt time to reexamine the standard approach to pain management. This includes the role of physical therapy professionals in managing pain and in treating patients in pain who may be managing symptoms with prescription pain medications. For additional information on the scope of the opioid epidemic and the ways physical therapy professionals can have a positive impact, please visit the following APTA resources:

- [White Paper: Beyond Opioids: How Physical Therapy Can Transform Pain Management to Improve Health.](#)
- [Davenport, Todd E., et al. "Navigating the intersection between persistent pain and the opioid crisis: population health perspectives for physical therapy." *Physical therapy* 100.6 \(2020\): 995-1007.](#)

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