

3 Ways to Avoid the Physical Therapy Trap

Did you know your employee's back injury and subsequent 8-week physical therapy prescription might not be as necessary as you think?

Physical therapy is a significant factor shaping public clinics' business operations in the tightly interconnected world of healthcare.

Get the facts, discover the potential pitfalls of excessive physical therapy use, and explore three strategies to help employers optimize the recovery journey, ensuring a quicker and smoother return to work for employees.

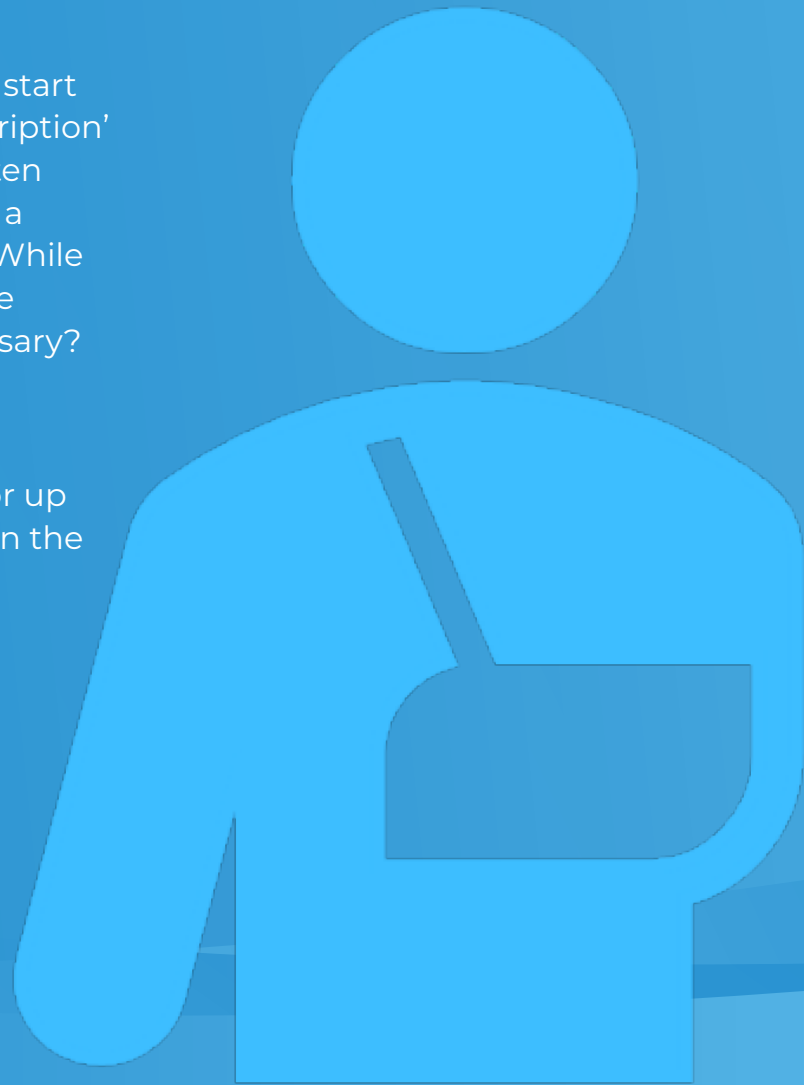
The Over-Prescription Dilemma in Physical Therapy

Suppose a patient is diagnosed with a musculoskeletal injury, which accounts for around 33% of all workers' injury and illness cases — physical therapy is the go-to option for treatment.

The scenario becomes captivating when we start to untangle the 'physical therapy over-prescription' dilemma. Issues such as a back injury are often evaluated, and the patient is recommended a rigorous, 8-week physical therapy regimen. While this can boost the clinic's financial inflow, the question arises - Is it always medically necessary?

Mismanagement of treatment, particularly in physical therapy, represents a significant challenge for employers. It often accounts for up to 50% of workers' compensation costs within the first 90 to 120 days of a claim.

Moreover, over 50% of the costs associated with lost time from work under workers' compensation are attributed to physical medicine, including physical therapy. The downside is that over-prescribed therapy delays the return-to-work process and unexpectedly inflates an organization's expenses.





Consider a warehouse employee who slips on a wet floor and injures his back. He rushes to a nearby clinic, and the physician prescribes two weekly physical therapy sessions for the next eight weeks, making this an OSHA-recordable outcome. However, he cannot resume his previous efficiency levels even after completing the therapy and being absent from work for two months.

Three key reasons can lead to this scenario- inappropriate therapy prescription, the worker choosing to stop the therapy, or the therapy provided being ineffective.

Unfortunately, in certain cases, instead of addressing these problems, the primary care physician may recommend more therapy, thus initiating a vicious cycle of over-utilization. This pattern is detrimental to the patient's recovery and an unnecessary financial burden.

It is crucial to understand that increasing the number of visits does not necessarily translate into better treatment.

Physical therapy may be over-prescribed in numerous other scenarios:

1. Patients with chronic conditions like lower back pain may be automatically sent to extensive physical therapy without considering other pain management methods- overlooking potential alternatives that could be more effective.
2. Work-related injuries often lead to a default prescription of intensive physical therapy to hasten the return to work, not always considering the patient's overall health or injury specifics, leading to a generic approach that may not suit every case.
3. High patient volumes can push clinics to prescribe physical therapy as a standard response to musculoskeletal issues, aiming for efficiency over personalized care. This often results in unnecessary therapy, driven by the clinic's operational protocols rather than patient-specific needs.
4. The financial incentives in the healthcare system might encourage the over-prescription of physical therapy, as clinic revenue can depend on the volume of services. This uncomfortable truth highlights the need for a balanced approach focusing on patient care and efficient use of resources.

While physical therapy remains a critical component in treating various injuries, over-prescription is a considerable problem that needs to be addressed.

3 Strategies for Managing Physical Therapy

To prevent overutilization, all three approaches to best practice care will expedite the return to work process for employees, help them become advocates in their own recovery, and reduce the employer's healthcare and absenteeism costs.

1

Enforce an Early Intervention Culture

While you may not be able to eliminate injuries, you can impact the outcome. How? By taking action and maximizing the power of early intervention. For example, most sprain/strain injuries can be effectively treated with over-the-counter anti-inflammatory medications, eliminating the need for physical therapy. The key to minimizing negative outcomes lies in early reporting and immediate action. By assessing early and providing management, the company can manage the risk by preventing unnecessary medical procedures, costs, lost work time, and other absenteeism costs.

2

Properly Vet Healthcare Providers

Many clinics have physical therapy built into their business model and treat the need for physical therapy as the standard. But does it mean it's needed and medically necessary? The long-term approach to appropriate medical care (from first aid to PT) is properly vetting healthcare providers from the get-go. This is a streamlined way to ensure employees receive the best treatment plan for their injuries.

3

Closely Monitor RTW by a Nurse Case Manager

Most minor to moderate injuries can be resolved with first aid measures. Our best practice approach to occupational health lowers workers' comp costs, improves outcomes, and expedites the return to work process so your employees can get back to work quickly and safely.



While there's no easy fix when an employee suffers from an injury and requires medical treatment, our OSHA-trained Nurse Case Managers provide guidance to navigate the workers' comp system and help ensure their treatment is appropriate, conservative, and necessary. By focusing on the patient and not just the injury, you can maximize improvements for an expedited return to work.

“Employers should investigate comprehensive solutions to keep costs manageable and to deliver **quality, evidence-based care** to injured employees.”

*Frank Radack, Vice President & Manager,
Liberty Mutual Insurance*

Resources

<https://riskandinsurance.com/better-control-total-workers-comp-costs-manage-physical-medicine/>

<https://www.workforce.com/2017/03/13/overuse-physical-therapy-growing-pain-point-workers-comp-costs/>

https://www.healthsystems.com/File%20Library/Document%20Library/14-1457_Physical_Medicine_White_Paper_vf.pdf

<https://viewpoint.libertymutualgroup.com/article/control-workers-comp-costs-reining-physical-medicine-expenses/>



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A Simpler Approach to Managed Recovery

Our skilled health experts help injured employees get immediate and appropriate treatment at the time of their injury while navigating both employers and their employees through the process with early intervention, close monitoring, and follow-ups until the employee is safely able to return to work.