

# PHYSICAL THERAPY: A SAFE ALTERNATIVE TO OPIOIDS FOR PAIN MANAGEMENT



The increased use of opioids for pain management in America has created a national health crisis. Opioid prescription rates have quadrupled since 1999, leading to similar increases in prescription opioid deaths and heroin deaths.

In response, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released guidelines in March 2016 urging prescribers to reduce the use of opioids in favor of safer alternatives in the treatment of chronic pain. Physical therapy is one of the recommended nonopioid alternatives.

Physical therapists treat pain through movement, helping patients improve strength, flexibility, and range of motion. Physical therapists also can educate their patients about pain, which has been known to improve outcomes<sup>1</sup>.

## WHY PHYSICAL THERAPY FOR PAIN MANAGEMENT?

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| Physical therapists treat pain through movement.  | Opioids only mask the sensation of pain.  |
| Physical therapy “side effects” include improved mobility, increased independence, decreased pain, and prevention of other health problems through movement and exercise.   | Opioid side effects include depression, overdose, addiction, and withdrawal symptoms. |
| Physical therapy is effective for numerous conditions, and the CDC cited “high quality evidence” supporting exercise as part of physical therapist treatment for familiar conditions like low back pain, hip and knee osteoarthritis, and fibromyalgia. | Opioid effectiveness for long-term pain management is inconclusive in many cases.     |

## OTHER REASONS TO #CHOOSEPT

**Alternative to surgery:** Physical therapy has been found to be as effective as surgery for conditions including meniscal tears and knee osteoarthritis<sup>2</sup>, and rotator cuff tears<sup>3</sup>.

**Individualized treatment:** Physical therapist treatment plans are tailored to each person’s needs and goals, taking preexisting conditions into account.

**Identification of potential risks:** Physical therapists can identify additional health issues, beyond what the patient initially reports, thereby improving a person’s overall health and quality of life.

People who are experiencing pain can learn more about the benefits of physical therapy as a safe, effective alternative to opioids by visiting [MoveForwardPT.com/ChoosePT](https://MoveForwardPT.com/ChoosePT).

**#ChoosePT**  
[MoveForwardPT.com](https://MoveForwardPT.com)

## REFERENCES

- 1 Rundell SD, Davenport TE. Patient education based on principles of cognitive behavioral therapy for a patient with persistent low back pain: a case report. *J Orthop Sports Phys Ther.* 2010;40:494–501.
- 2 Katz JN, Brophy RH, Chaisson CE, et al. Surgery versus physical therapy for a meniscal tear and osteoarthritis [erratum in: *N Engl J Med.* 2013;369:683]. *N Engl J Med.* 2013;368:1675-1684.
- 3 Longo UG, Franceschi F, Berton A, et al. Conservative treatment and rotator cuff tear progression. *Med Sport Sci.* 2012;57:90–99.