

# THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC: WHAT PTs AND PTAs NEED TO KNOW

America is in the midst of an opioid epidemic. Opioid prescriptions have quadrupled since 1999. In 2012, health care providers wrote 259 million opioid prescriptions, enough for every adult in the United States to have a bottle of pills. As the volume of opioids has increased, so has the amount of misuse, abuse, and overdose. Meanwhile, heroin abuse and overdose have increased at similar rates.

Physical therapy is a safe and effective alternative to opioids for long-term pain management and prevention. 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, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (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.

Opioid and heroin use have increased significantly across most demographic groups. “As many as 1 in 4 people who receive prescription opioids long-term for noncancer pain in primary care settings struggles with addiction,” the CDC cites. Every day, more than 1,000 people are treated in emergency departments for misusing prescription opioids. Since 1999, more than 165,000 people in the United States have died from opioid pain-medication-related overdoses.

### 3. APTA's #ChoosePT campaign provides resources for patients and clients.

APTA has launched a national public awareness campaign about the growing toll of the opioid epidemic 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 to [www.MoveForwardPT.com/ChoosePT](http://www.MoveForwardPT.com/ChoosePT). Explore the site and access the available toolkit to help promote the campaign.

### 4. APTA's PTNow website includes resources for clinicians.

To access evidence-based resources on the treatment of pain and chronic conditions, visit [www.PTNow.org/Opioid](http://www.PTNow.org/Opioid).

## Opioid Awareness Checklist

In your practice, do you...

- Educate your patients about the dangers of opioids, including the increased risk for heroin use?
- 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. Learn more at: [www.MoveForwardPT.com/ChoosePT](http://www.MoveForwardPT.com/ChoosePT).