

Physical therapists in peril: Navigating the hidden hazards of healing

White paper

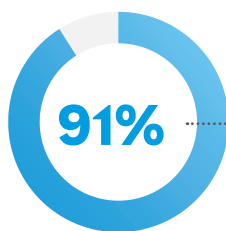


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Work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMDs) are common injuries among physical therapists (PT) who work in outpatient physical therapy clinics and home health agencies.



Nearly **91% of all PTs** have reported WRMDs at some point during their careers, many occurring within the first 4-5 years of practice and demonstrating a **1-year incidence of 20.7%** for moderate to major work-related musculoskeletal disorders.

In healthcare, a field where the goal is to restore health and functionality to clients, why do we see so many worker injuries? Let's explore the unique challenges faced by physical therapists and discuss ways to mitigate risk and control workers' compensation costs.

A changing landscape

A great deal has changed in the field of skilled rehabilitation. According to a JAMA Health Forum study:



Therapy minutes provided post hip fracture were **reduced by 13%** in skilled nursing facilities in the period between January 2018 and March 2020 (encompassing the transition from the RUG payment system to PDPM).



Demographics of clients receiving therapy is evolving; according to studies the prevalence of obesity among adults in the U.S. has continued to rise significantly.

These pressures can impact worker health and safety as physical therapists are tasked with producing measurable results in a shorter period with a more complex clientele. Implementing a robust worker safety program can achieve outcomes including higher satisfaction and productivity among physical therapists, enhanced loyalty and employee retention, and reduced workers' compensation expenses.

A risky business?

Physical therapists face a diverse array of risks in their profession, which can significantly impact their practice and the quality of care they provide. Understanding and addressing these risks can better ensure the safety and well-being of both therapists and their clients, as well as maintain the overall effectiveness of rehabilitation services.



Musculoskeletal injuries

Physical therapists are at a higher risk of musculoskeletal injuries. Lifting clients, repetitive motions, and prolonged standing can lead to strains, sprains, and other related injuries. Workers may also have intrinsic characteristics like pre-existing health conditions, advanced age, or prior injuries that can further heighten this risk.



Slips, trips, and falls

An increased likelihood of slips, trips, and falls, can result in injuries to both employees and clients due to the nature of the physical therapy clinics. They are busy places with clients and staff constantly moving around. Equipment storage is often a challenge in smaller therapy gyms.



Exposure to infectious diseases

Clients may have infectious diseases, such as bloodborne pathogens or respiratory illnesses. This exposure poses a risk to the health and safety of the therapists and requires proper protocols and protective measures.



Ergonomic hazards

Poor ergonomics, awkward postures, improper equipment setup, and inadequate workstations can contribute to musculoskeletal disorders and chronic pain and lead to long-term health issues for physical therapists.



Work-related stress

Dealing with clients in pain or facing long recovery periods can be emotionally and mentally demanding. This can lead to stress-related issues among therapists, impacting their overall well-being and job performance.





Mitigating risk and maximizing outcomes

Adopting the following best practices can mitigate risks and optimize patient outcomes, while supporting the overall professional longevity of therapists in a demanding healthcare space.

Implement safety programs

Organizations should establish comprehensive safety programs that address the specific risks faced by their in-house or contracted employees. This includes providing training on proper lifting techniques, promoting good ergonomics, and conducting regular safety inspections. Consider holding regular safety committee meetings with staff to encourage feedback and find solutions as a team.

Maintain a safe environment

This involves keeping walkways clear, maintaining proper lighting, and promptly addressing any hazards or maintenance issues that may arise.

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

Provide appropriate PPE, such as gloves, masks, and protective clothing to protect physical therapists from exposure to infectious diseases. Regular training on the proper use and disposal of PPE should be provided.

Ergonomic assessments

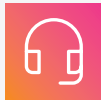
Conducting ergonomic assessments of workstations and equipment can help identify and address potential hazards. Adjusting equipment, providing ergonomic tools, and promoting proper body mechanics can significantly reduce the risk of musculoskeletal injuries.

Employee wellness programs

Implement wellness programs that focus on stress management, mental health support, and work-life balance. These programs can help reduce work-related stress among physical therapists and lead to improved job satisfaction, productivity, and overall well-being.

Effective claims management

Establish a streamlined process for reporting and managing workers' compensation claims. Promptly investigate incidents, provide necessary medical care, and facilitate the return-to-work process to help minimize the impact of injuries and smooth recovery for employees.



Next level claims support

MMA's Advanced Advocacy program for workers' compensation claims is designed to help clients effectively manage and mitigate their risks. This comprehensive program includes expert claims management, proactive injury prevention strategies, and tailored return-to-work initiatives. Leveraging data analytics, we identify trends and develop customized solutions while providing education and training to enhance workplace safety. With a strong focus on claims advocacy and negotiation, MMA strives for fair treatment from insurance carriers to reduce the total cost of risk while promoting a safer work environment.



Healing the healer

While dedicated to healing and restoring health, the physical therapy profession faces significant challenges that can jeopardize the well-being of its practitioners. Addressing these hidden hazards not only protects physical therapists but also fosters a more effective and sustainable healthcare environment, benefiting both practitioners and the clients they serve.

How we can help

Contact a member of our healthcare safety team or healthcare practice to implement changes in your organization to enhance well-being with measurable results.

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