

Physical Therapists Could Help Healthcare System Catch up From COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has delayed many physician appointments, elective procedures, and medical tests. As restrictions ease, working through this backlog will be a challenge. For people who have pain or orthopedic issues, their best option may be to see a physical therapist first.

Physical therapists are highly trained specialists who are well equipped to be the first point of contact for patients with musculoskeletal issues. Illinois law allows patients direct access to physical therapy without seeing a physician first. In addition, research shows that people who see a PT first have better outcomes, recover quicker, and spend less money.

Better Outcomes

Because back pain is so common, there is a lot of outcome data from people with back pain. A study of 150,000 insurance claims published in *Health Services Research*, found that those who saw a physical therapist at the first point of care had an 89 percent lower probability of receiving an opioid prescription, a 28 percent lower probability of having advanced imaging services, and a 15 percent lower probability of an emergency department visit.

Faster Recovery

The Mitchell Study published in *Physical Therapy* looked at outcomes when patients went to a PT first vs. seeing a physician first. It found that patients who went to their physician before their PT spent 65% more time recovering, and had 60% more office visits than patients who went directly to their PT.

Less Expensive

There are many studies showing that the faster you get to your PT, the less money you spend. A study published in the *Journal of Orthopaedic and Sports Physical Therapy* showed that patients who obtained physical therapy via direct access had significantly lower medical costs—an average of \$1,543 less per patient than those who chose referral from a physician. The Mitchell study mentioned above found that the total cost for physician referral to physical therapists was 123% or 2.2 times higher than the paid claims for people who went straight to PT.

As the healthcare system tries to work through the backlog of delayed visits and procedures, using physical therapists as the first provider for patients with pain or orthopedic issues could take some of the pressure off of primary care physicians and orthopedists. It could also lead to better outcomes, quicker recoveries, and cost savings for patients. That's a winning solution for everyone involved.