

How PTs Can Cut Your Employee Health Care Costs and Improve Well-Being



Today's employer is facing a daunting challenge: finding a creative, evidence-based solution to the explosive and unrelenting growth of health care spending.

APTA is excited that physical therapists and physical therapist assistants — with their training, knowledge, and proven ability to deliver cost-effective evidence-based services — are being recruited to help employers lower health care costs, lessen the impact of pain and opioids, and keep their people healthy, happy, strong, and productive.

The Challenge: Employers' Rising Health Care Coverage Costs

Health care coverage is one of the largest risks to your company's bottom line. It has been estimated as one of the largest costs after payroll, prompting some to conclude that every American company is a health care business (Chase, 2018). Whether you self-insure or are covered under an outside plan, you pay significant amounts for your employees' health care expenses.

Sources of costs include:

- Absenteeism.
- "Presenteeism" (productivity losses due to health-related distractions).
- Rise in chronic conditions associated with a disability.
- Low employee morale and dissatisfaction with the employer.
- Legal claims.
- Health care following injury or illness.
- Workers' compensation claims.
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration recordable events* and penalties.

*Injury or illness that results in death, days away from work, restricted work, transfer to another job, medical treatment beyond first aid or loss of consciousness.

The Solution: Moving Upstream

The further along on the health continuum a problem is identified and treated, the more extensive and expensive it becomes. Preventive and health-promoting actions, sometimes called "upstream efforts," slow and even reverse the negative health trend. Categorized as primary (efforts to identify risk and prevent disease or injury from occurring), secondary (efforts to detect and treat the earliest signs of disease), or tertiary (efforts to minimize the care requirements and restore health quickly after an adverse event), these efforts take a proactive and preemptive approach.

Examples of Primary Prevention Targets

Heart disease. Targeting modifiable risk factors such as overweight, stress, inactivity, and smoking with programs for weight loss, workforce well-being, exercise, and smoking cessation can help prevent development of the most common forms of heart disease.

Diabetes. Targeting modifiable risk factors such as inactivity, high body mass index, cardiac risk, and elevated blood pressure with programs for exercise, weight loss, and prevention of cardiac risks (see above) can help prevent or delay development of type 2 diabetes mellitus, which is common in adults.

Work injuries. By assessing and targeting known risk factors in the workplace, employers can avoid incidents that would result in workers compensation claims and fines.

Spinal and other pain syndromes. Targeting modifiable risk factors such as inactivity with programs for exercise and fitness can help prevent back pain, one of the most common conditions for which health care claims are submitted.

Pregnancy-related complications. Through preventive measures and early education, pregnant women at a low risk for complication are able to avoid high-risk status after delivery, lowering costs and improving the health of the baby and mother in the long term.

Examples of Secondary Prevention Targets

Arthritis. Identifying and addressing movement changes and pain associated with arthritis before it develops into a larger or more disabling problem makes it easier to manage, and can decrease long-term spending, improve worker productivity, and reduce absenteeism.

Spinal and Movement Related Pain. Despite common recommendations against it (AAPMR, 2014; AAFP, 2014, ASA, 2014), typical care for neck and back pain begins with medications, imaging, injections, and possibly surgery resulting in added premium costs of \$4,000 per person per year (USBJI, 2016). Research and clinical trials indicate that at the onset of pain (day one) most employees require only two physical therapist visits focused on a primary care program to cut spending by more than half and reduce absenteeism (Fritz, 2012). Furthermore, treating spinal pain with physical therapy within one to two weeks of onset can decrease spending by more than \$1,200 per patient episode (Zigenfus, 2000). Early access to physical therapy is a cost-effective and safe alternative to the use of opioids in the management of acute spinal and other movement-related pain syndromes.

Physical Therapists as Prevention, Health Promotion, and Population Health Researchers and Providers

You might know physical therapists as experts in occupational health or even rehabilitation, but these professionals do much more:

- Physical therapists are health services researchers who are leading experts in nonsurgical conservative care, health, and well-being.
- Many physical therapists are board-certified specialists in a variety of areas, such as orthopedic, geriatric, cardiovascular/pulmonary, and women's health physical therapy.
- Physical therapists are experts in movement and evaluation of body systems.
- Physical therapists treat people of all ages and abilities, helping them improve and maintain function and quality of life.
- Physical therapists earn a clinical doctorate degree before taking a national physical therapy licensure exam allowing them to see patients. In most states and territories a referral is not required.

Physical therapists work collaboratively with you to:

- Define and analyze employer challenges:

- Identify baseline data, such as current health care spending and employee productivity levels, to define the scope of the problem.
- Define the top risks contributing to rising health care costs and employee loss of productivity.
- Use big data to guide the solution.
- Identify target areas:
 - To customize program goals, which may include:
 - Containing or even lowering health care costs and premiums.
 - Improving employee satisfaction.
 - Improving employees' presenteeism, or productivity.
 - Decreasing days off from work.
 - Decreasing risk of an employee's health issue progressing to a legal claim.
- Customize programs to meet the needs of your specific employee population, such as:
 - Routing all nonemergent musculoskeletal conditions through a physical therapist first with reevaluation after 12 months to assess of overall health care cost savings and patient outcomes.
 - Implementing programs to improve fitness of pregnant women to decrease complications following labor.
 - Providing professionals possessing the required skills to successfully implement the program.
- Lead a team of health care providers in accordance with research-based guidelines to streamline processes, decrease costs, and improve your employee outcomes.
- Provide ongoing program assessment and reporting with continuous quality improvement.

The Physical Therapist's Proposition

Phase 1. Work with the employer to identify key concerns related to the cost of treating musculoskeletal conditions and pain.

Phase 2. Study total cost of the episode of care using both claims data and process analyses.

Phase 3. Implement population health strategies to identify those at risk in order to provide them with easy access to the knowledge and skills of physical therapists, to prevent and reverse risk while restoring health of employees and the businesses for which they work.

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