



Physical Therapy Services Can Slash Low Back Pain Treatment Costs

The cost of acute low back pain is taking its toll in the United States, ringing in at more than \$100 billion in total associated costs each year. That figure could be dramatically reduced if patients with low back pain are referred to physical therapy as the first course of treatment.

Physical therapy is a cost-effective alternative to injections, surgery, and other more invasive approaches. In fact, first-year treatment costs could be slashed by 72% when physical therapy is pursued first, according to the authors of a study published in the scientific journal *Health Services Research*.

Following a patient evaluation, a physical therapist trained to treat low back pain will review the patient's plan of care and establish goals. In physical therapy, patients learn exercises to increase function and reduce pain. Physical therapists educate patients and introduce maintenance programs that are critical to the prevention of future back problems.

“Low back pain is one of the most common complaints I see. It is important to assess other parts of the body down the chain, not only the low back. Abnormalities in muscle length, joint mobility, and gait pattern can all lead to low back pain. As physical therapists, we can help narrow down your problem through a personalized plan.” – Joe Bures, DPT

According to the study, “Physical Therapy or Advanced Imaging as First Management Strategy Following a New Consultation for Low Back Pain in Primary Care: Associations with Future Health Care Utilization and Charges,” patients who began treatment with a physical therapist were less likely to receive surgery and injections and had fewer specialist appointments and emergency department visits in the first year following the primary consultation. In many cases, an initial referral for advanced imaging causes heightened concern thereby leading some patients and providers down the path of additional care.

The team of researchers—physical therapists Julie M. Fritz, PT, PhD, FAPTA, Gerard P. Brennan, PT, PhD, and Stephen J. Hunter, PT, PhD, OCS—discovered that beginning treatment with a physical therapist lowered costs for patients with low back pain by 50% when compared with an initial referral for advanced imaging. Tracking patient costs throughout the first year following the primary care consultation, the study authors found that the physical therapy cohort spent about \$4800 less, on average, than the imaging group.

"One month of physical therapy intervention is less expensive than one MRI scan. An MRI alone has no chance of helping patients feel better or function better, so it is a smart argument to instead spend those precious health care dollars on a course of physical therapy treatment, which has been proven clinically to be an effective treatment for patients with low back pain." – Jena Haigh, DPT

Patients with new episodes of low back pain will not only save a considerable amount of money when physical therapy is recommended as the first course of treatment, but they'll also be on the path to a healthier future.



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About Prairie Rehabilitation

At Prairie Rehabilitation our Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Hand Therapy, and Speech Therapy experts are passionate about helping our patients reclaim their way of life and function. It's about you; you are unique with distinct qualities, abilities, and needs. At Prairie Rehabilitation we embrace the philosophy of "Patient First" care; treating each individual with precise and personalized care. To achieve the best results and to speed your recovery, we are committed to utilizing the most clinically proven and current concepts in Rehabilitation.

About the Private Practice Section of the American Physical Therapy Association

Founded in 1956, the Private Practice Section of the American Physical Therapy Association champions the success of physical therapist-owned businesses. Our members are leaders and innovators in the health care system. The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) represents more than 85,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants and students of physical therapy nationwide. For more information, please visit www.ppsapta.org.