Physiotherapy is both clinically and cost effective in the management and treatment of musculoskeletal disorders.

**Introduction**
Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are a group of painful disorders in muscles, tendons and nerves, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, epicondylitis (tennis elbow), neck or back pain, and strains or sprains.

Patients with MSDs are the largest patient population group treated by physiotherapists in Alberta.

Rapid access to musculoskeletal physiotherapists can reduce the amount of time people are off sick and is vital in preventing a new acute problem from becoming chronic and long-lasting. A recent study conducted in Saskatchewan found that a spinal triage service delivered by physiotherapists was very satisfactory to both patients and referring health-care providers.

Physiotherapists have pioneered innovative ways of providing fast and appropriate access within existing services.

**Self referral**
In Alberta, physiotherapists are direct-access practitioners, which means a patient can consult a physiotherapist directly (self-referral) without a physician referral. There is evidence that patients who consult a physiotherapist directly for an MSD miss less work, use less prescription drugs, have fewer x-rays, and require fewer visits to their physician. Health-care costs for self-referred patients are significantly lower per episode of physiotherapy care than for patients referred by their physician.

**Size of the problem**
- There are over 200 types of MSDs.
- **11 million Canadians** over the age of 12 have experienced the effects of a musculoskeletal disorder. As the population ages, this number is projected to grow to 15 million by 2031.
- Repetitive strain injuries affect about **15% of Canadians** (4.5 million people), according to Statistics Canada.
- **Low back pain is reported by 80% of people** at some time in their life.
- MSDs are the most common reason for repeated general practitioner consultation.
- Chronic low back pain ranks as one of the leading reasons for physician consultations among people under 60 years of age in Canada.
Risk stratification

Back pain can range from a simple ache which will correct itself to a long-standing pain. Risk stratification, where patients are screened to identify the risks which may affect their treatment outcome, allows patients to be directed to the treatment pathway they need rather than applying a one size fits all approach.

The UK’s Keele University demonstrated that risk stratification using the STarT Bach Tool for neck and back patients was clinically and cost effective. Significantly improved outcomes at four months and £34.39 saving per patient was shown when comparing the STarT Bach intervention group with those who received usual care.

The STarT Bach method asks patients to fill out a questionnaire with the generally practitioner or physiotherapist. This identifies whether the risks that may affect the treatment outcome are low, medium or high. The questionnaire takes into account the patient’s symptoms, and their perception of their pain as well as how it is affecting their life. Patients can then be directed to an appropriate treatment pathway based on this assessment. The pathway may include greater emphasis on self management for low risk patients or greater management of psychological distress for high risk patients.

Promoting self management

Musculoskeletal physiotherapists support self management. They integrate education about the specific MSD with interventions or treatments that ensure the patient has the knowledge and understanding to manage their condition after discharge. This includes a home program of exercises tailored to the individual patient’s needs.

Physiotherapy Alberta - College + Association provides information for the public about evidence-based care for a range of topics, including ergonomics, low back pain, and other musculoskeletal conditions that physiotherapists treat.

Providing self-management resources at an early stage can help avoid the need for referral to secondary care with its associated higher costs.

References

12. Keele University. STarT Bach; https://www.hee.ac.uk/ost/startbactool/

Acknowledgement

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