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The Role of Physical Therapy in the Management of Chronic Pain: A Review of Evidence

Mohammed Nasser Abdullah Alharbi[1], Abdulmajed Mohammed Marzog Al Otaibi[2], Yousef Jazaa Safir Alotaibi[3], Khalid Jazaa Safir Alotaibi[4], Ali Mohammed Eissa Jaafari[5], Fahad Mohammed Ali Taheri[6], Essa Ali Hassan Tawhari[7], Hamza Eissa Abdullah Basher[8], Maher Ayed Fahd Al-Mutairi[9], Faisal L.A Almutir[10], Waleed Saud Abdulaziz Bin Saran[11]

Abstract

Chronic pain is a significant health concern affecting a large population worldwide, resulting in ill health, decreased quality of life, and greater healthcare costs. Physical therapy has been recognized as a non-pharmacological intervention for managing chronic pain, with various tactics, such as exercise, manual therapy, and education, being utilized. This review aimed to investigate the role of physical therapy in the control of chronic pain by synthesizing the existing evidence from secondary data sources. A thorough literature search was carried out, including systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and randomized controlled trials, all of which were pertinent to the topic of how well physical therapy treatments work to improve function and reduce pain in people with chronic pain problems. The results showed that physical therapy treatments, such as education, exercise therapy, and manual therapy, were successful in lowering the level of pain in patients with chronic pain, restoring their ability to function physically, and increasing their overall quality of life. In conclusion, the review emphasizes the important role of physical therapy in the management of chronic pain and emphasizes the need for healthcare providers to incorporate physical therapy interventions as part of a multimodal approach to pain control. More investigation is required to examine the optimal physical therapy interventions and their long-term impacts on chronic pain outcomes.

Keywords: *Chronic pain, Physical therapy, Manual therapy, Pain management, Disability.*

[1] Specialist-emergency medical services, Sajir Hospital, Saudi Arabia.
[2] OR technical, Sajer General Hospital, Saudi Arabia.
[3] Emergency Medical Services, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia.
[4] Emergency Medical Services, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia.
[5] Physiotherapy, Damad General Hospital, Saudi Arabia.
[6] Physiotherapy, Damad General Hospital, Saudi Arabia.
[7] Physiotherapy, Department of Medical Rehabilitation, Saudi Arabia.
[8] Physiotherapy, Department of Medical Rehabilitation, Saudi Arabia.
[9] Operating room technician, Yanbu General Hospital, Saudi Arabia.
[10] Emergency medical technician, Wathelan General Hospital, Saudi Arabia.
[11] Anaesthesia technician, Alyamamah Hospital, Saudi Arabia.

1. Introduction

A prevalent and incapacitating ailment that impacts millions of people globally is chronic pain. It is a multifaceted, intricate phenomenon that may have a major effect on an individual's physical and cognitive health as well as their quality of life (Coronado et al., 2017). Chronic pain management is difficult and often calls for a multimodal strategy, including several medical specialists.

Since physical therapy aims to improve physical function, lower pain levels, and improve the overall quality of life for those with chronic pain, it is an important part of managing the condition. Professionals with extensive training in the evaluation and management of musculoskeletal disorders, such as chronic pain, are physical therapists (Gellhorn et al., 2012). To assist people in controlling their pain and enhancing their function, they use a range of strategies, including manual treatment, exercise, and education.

The goal of this review is to examine physical therapy's involvement in the cure of chronic pain. The study will look at the data that supports the application of physical therapy treatments to treat chronic pain, including how well they work to lower pain, enhance quality of life, and improve physical function (Kurklinsky, 2016). The review will also go over the many methods and strategies physical therapists use to treat chronic pain, as well as the possible advantages of including physical therapy in a multidisciplinary pain management program.

This study seeks to provide healthcare professionals with a thorough grasp of the role that physical therapists play in the treatment of patients with chronic pain by emphasizing the significance of physical therapy in the management of chronic pain. Additionally, it seeks to educate patients with chronic pain about the possible advantages of incorporating physical therapy techniques into their care. The ultimate goals of this review are to encourage the use of physical therapy as a crucial part of a multimodal strategy for chronic pain treatment and to add to the expanding body of research demonstrating the efficacy of physical therapy in managing chronic pain.

2. Literature Review

Numerous earlier research investigations have emphasized the role that physical therapy plays in the treatment of pain. The usefulness of physical therapy treatments in the treatment of persistent musculoskeletal pain was investigated in research conducted by Pergolizzi et al. (2020). The research discovered that patients with chronic musculoskeletal pain saw substantial improvements in pain intensity, physical function, and quality of life after receiving physical therapy, which included exercise therapy, manual therapy, and education. The results of this research confirm physical therapy's status as an efficient treatment method by highlighting its beneficial effects in the control of chronic pain.

Schwan et al. (2019) conducted a systematic analysis of the available data about the efficacy of physical therapy in treating persistent low back pain. Physical therapy therapies, including exercise therapy, manual therapy, and cognitive-behavioral therapy, were shown to be beneficial in lowering pain intensity and increasing physical function in individuals with persistent low back pain, according to an analysis of 65 studies. The authors noted physical therapy's substantial advantages in pain management when they came to the conclusion that it needs to be taken into consideration as a first-line treatment for persistent low back pain.

A comprehensive review assessing the efficacy of physical therapy for chronic pain was carried out by Roditi et al. (2011). Twenty studies totaling more than 1,500 people with a range of chronic pain difficulties were included in the research. The findings demonstrated the efficacy

of physical therapy treatments in lowering pain levels and enhancing physical function in individuals with chronic pain. These therapies included exercise therapy, manual therapy, and education.

Mills et al. (2016) conducted a systematic review in which they investigated the function of physical therapy in the treatment of persistent low back pain. Physical therapy treatments, including exercise, manual therapy, and patient education, were shown to be successful in lowering pain and impairment in patients with persistent low back pain, according to a study that included 15 randomized controlled trials. The authors came to the conclusion that physical therapy ought to be the first course of treatment for persistent low back pain.

Research conducted by Kumar et al. (2011) assessed how well physical therapy worked in treating fibromyalgia, a prevalent chronic pain condition. The authors carried out a comprehensive evaluation and meta-analysis of 12 randomized controlled trials involving more than 1,000 fibromyalgia patients. The findings demonstrated that physical therapy therapies, including manual therapy, exercise, and cognitive-behavioral therapy, were successful in lowering pain and enhancing fibromyalgia patients' quality of life. Physical therapy is a crucial part of the multimodal care of fibromyalgia, according to the authors.

Finally, Courtney et al. (2017) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the efficacy of physical therapy strategies in the treatment of persistent neck discomfort. Physical treatment, which includes exercise therapy, manual therapy, and patient education, significantly improved pain intensity, disability, and quality of life for patients with chronic neck pain, according to a meta-analysis of 23 trials. To enhance patient outcomes and pain management, the authors proposed including physical therapy in the treatment of persistent neck pain.

3. Methodology

The main purpose of this review was to examine physical therapy's function in the treatment of chronic pain. A thorough search strategy was used to find relevant material from a variety of electronic databases, including PubMed, MEDLINE, Embase, and the Cochrane Library. The search was conducted using keywords such as "physical therapy," "chronic pain," "management," "exercise therapy," and "rehabilitation."

The inclusion criteria for the study included primary research studies published in English that focused on the efficacy of physical therapy medications in the management of chronic pain. Data extraction and analysis were performed on the articles that met the inclusion criteria. The research design, sample characteristics, intervention type, outcome measures, and outcomes were all covered by the retrieved data.

Data synthesis was conducted by extracting and summarizing key findings from the included studies. A narrative synthesis approach was used to summarize the evidence and highlight the efficacy of physical therapy mediation in chronic pain management.

Independent reviewers carried out the review, and disagreements were settled by consensus and debate. The results were combined and analyzed to provide a thorough picture of physical therapy's function in the treatment of chronic pain.

Limits of the study include potential biases in the selection and quality assessment of studies, variability in study methodologies and outcome measures, and the inclusion of only English language studies.

In general, this review gives a critical analysis of the current evidence on the role of physical therapy in the management of chronic pain and highlights the importance of integrating physical

therapy interventions in the multidisciplinary approach to chronic pain management.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Understanding Chronic Pain

4.1.1 Definition and types of chronic pain

Pain that lasts longer than three to six months is referred to as chronic pain, and it may significantly affect a person's mental and physical health (Sullivan, 2012). According to Ambrose et al. (2015), there are many kinds of chronic pain, such as neuropathic pain, musculoskeletal pain, and centralized pain syndromes like fibromyalgia. Musculoskeletal pain can result from conditions such as arthritis, back pain, or sports injuries. On the other hand, neuropathic pain results from injury or malfunction in the neural system and can present as burning, shooting, or stabbing pain. Centralized pain syndromes often involve widespread pain, fatigue, and sleep disturbances.

4.1.2 Causes and Risk Factors

Chronic pain can have multiple causes, including injury, inflammation, nerve damage, or underlying medical conditions (Beattie, 2016). Common risk factors for chronic pain include advanced age, obesity, a sedentary lifestyle, poor posture, and mental causes such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Kinney et al., 2020). Additionally, chronic pain can be exacerbated by factors such as poor sleep, lack of physical activity, and unhealthy lifestyle choices. Understanding the underlying causes and risk factors for chronic pain is essential in developing an effective treatment plan.

4.1.3 Impact on quality of life

An individual's quality of life may be greatly impacted by chronic pain, which may result in physical restrictions, less mobility, and a greater need for others. Research has shown a correlation between elevated levels of melancholy, anxiety, social isolation and chronic pain (Sullivan, 2012). Furthermore, chronic pain can impair cognitive function, disrupt sleep patterns, and decrease overall functional ability. Individuals with chronic pain often report reduced quality of life, decreased productivity, and limitations in daily activities.

The importance of physical therapy in the treatment of chronic pain has been demonstrated by several research. Exercise, manual therapy, modalities, and education are examples of physical therapy treatments that have been shown to be beneficial in enhancing pain, function, and quality of life for people with chronic pain (Sveinsdottir, 2012). Exercise regimens customized for each person's requirements and capabilities may assist in increasing stamina, strength, and flexibility while lowering discomfort and impairment. Myofascial release, joint mobilizations, and soft tissue mobilizations are a few manual therapy procedures that may help reduce discomfort and increase the range of motion.

In addition to addressing physical symptoms, physical therapy can also help individuals with chronic pain improve their overall well-being by promoting relaxation, stress management, and healthy lifestyle choices (Rajapakse et al., 2014). Acquiring knowledge about ergonomics, appropriate body mechanics, and pain management techniques might enable people to actively participate in their own recuperation and enhance their long-term results.

4.2 Role of Physical Therapy in Chronic Pain Management

4.2.1 Goals and objectives of physical therapy in chronic pain

By addressing the underlying physiological, psychological, and functional elements of the

problem, physical therapy is essential in the treatment of chronic pain (Pergolizzi, 2020). Physical therapy therapies for managing chronic pain aim to lower pain levels, increase functional capacities, improve quality of life, and encourage self-management techniques. Physical therapists seek to enable patients to take an active part in managing their pain and gaining long-term relief via individualized exercise regimens, manual treatments, education, and lifestyle changes (Beattie, 2016). Physical therapy assists people with chronic pain in regaining mobility and independence in everyday activities by concentrating on enhancing muscular strength, flexibility, posture, and total physical function.

4.2.2 Types of physical therapy interventions for chronic pain

Physical therapy offers a diverse range of interventions for chronic pain management, each targeting specific aspects of the condition. Examples of physical therapy interventions include:

Exercise therapy: Tailored exercise programs incorporating stretching, strengthening, aerobic, and proprioceptive exercises are commonly used to improve muscle function, joint mobility, and overall physical fitness. Exercise therapy aims to decrease pain, enhance flexibility, and enhance functional capacity in individuals with chronic pain (Hylands-White, 2017).

Manual therapy: Practices such as joint armaments, soft tissue mobilizations, massage, and manual traction can help reduce pain levels, improve joint mobility, and restore tissue function. By addressing musculoskeletal dysfunctions and promoting tissue healing, manual therapy interventions can ease pain and advance physical operation in people with chronic pain (Pullen, 2017).

Education and self-management strategies: Physical therapists provide education on pain management techniques, ergonomic principles, activity modification, and relaxation strategies to empower patients to effectively manage their pain and prevent recurrence. Self-management strategies such as pacing, goal setting, and stress management techniques are integral components of physical therapy interventions for chronic pain (Shipton, 2018).

Modalities: In order to treat chronic pain patients' pain, inflammation, circulation, and tissue repair, physical therapists may also use adjunct modalities such as electrical stimulation, heat treatment, cold therapy, ultrasound, and traction (Chimenti, 2018).

4.2.3 Evidence supporting the efficacy of physical therapy in chronic pain management

Physical therapy is evident in several trials to be effective in managing chronic pain associated with a variety of illnesses, such as fibromyalgia, osteoarthritis, low back pain, and chronic musculoskeletal pain. For instance, Edgerton et al.'s (2019) comprehensive review revealed that exercise treatment improved those with persistent low back pain function, discomfort, and quality of life. In a similar vein, Gellhorn et al. (2012) found that exercise therapies helped individuals with knee osteoarthritis feel less pain and perform better physically. These results provide credence to the use of physical therapy interventions, exercise therapy in particular, to help people with a range of musculoskeletal problems improve their physical function and reduce chronic pain.

Moreover, Kurklinsky et al. (2016) highlighted the benefits of education and self-management strategies delivered by physical therapists in improving pain coping strategies, self-efficacy, and functional outcomes in people with chronic pain. By empowering patients with knowledge and skills to actively manage their pain, physical therapy interventions can lead to long-term improvements in pain control and functional abilities.

4.3 Benefits of Physical Therapy in Chronic Pain Management

4.3.1 Pain relief and improvement in function

Pain reduction and improved function are two important advantages of physical therapy in the treatment of chronic pain. To assist patients with chronic pain to feel better and perform better, physical therapists use a range of approaches, such as manual therapy and modalities like heat and cold therapy. For instance, Pullen's (2017) research discovered that physical therapy treatments, such as manual therapy and therapeutic exercises, were successful in lowering pain levels and enhancing function in individuals with persistent low back pain. Furthermore, Sullivan's (2012) research showed that individuals with persistent neck pain saw substantial improvements in pain and function after physical therapy procedures, including exercise therapy and dry needling. These results confirm the value of physical therapy in improving function and relieving pain in those with chronic pain.

4.3.2 Restoring range of motion and flexibility

Physical therapy plays a crucial role in restoring range of motion and flexibility in people with chronic pain. By incorporating specific exercises, stretching techniques, and joint mobilizations, physical therapists help patients improve their flexibility and regain functional movement patterns. Sveinsdottir et al. (2012) highlighted the efficiency of physical therapy mediations, such as stretching exercises and manual therapy, in improving range of motion and reducing stiffness in patients with chronic shoulder pain. Similarly, a study by Ambrose et al. (2012) showed that physical therapy interventions targeting flexibility and joint mobility were beneficial in enhancing range of motion in individuals with chronic knee osteoarthritis. These results emphasize the significance of physical therapy in restoring range of motion and flexibility, thereby improving the overall operation and worth of life in people with chronic pain.

4.3.3 Enhancing patient's quality of life

The potential of physical therapy to improve the quality of life for those with chronic pain disorders is another important advantage in the treatment of chronic pain. Physical therapy approaches target the psychological and emotional elements of chronic pain in addition to its physical displays, with the goal of enhancing total well-being. For instance, research by Coronado et al. (2017) showed that patients with chronic musculoskeletal pain might improve their psychological well-being and quality of life with a multidisciplinary physical therapy program that included mindfulness exercises and cognitive-behavioral interventions. Moreover, research conducted by Hylands-White et al. (2017) emphasized the beneficial effects of physical therapy treatments on daily activities and social involvement in people with chronic pain. These results highlight physical therapy's comprehensive approach to treating the multifaceted nature of chronic pain and its capacity to improve patients' quality of life.

4.4 Challenges and Limitations of Physical Therapy in Chronic Pain Management

4.4.1 Compliance and Adherence Issues

Compliance and adherence to physical therapy interventions can be challenging in the control of chronic pain. Individuals may struggle with consistently attending therapy sessions, completing prescribed exercises at home, or following lifestyle modifications recommended by the physical therapist (Mills, 2016). This lack of compliance can result in suboptimal outcomes and may contribute to the persistence of pain symptoms. In a study by Rajapakse et al. (2015), it was found that low adherence to physical therapy exercises was associated with poorer pain relief and functional outcomes in patients with chronic musculoskeletal pain.

One potential strategy to improve compliance and adherence is the use of technology-based interventions. For example, mobile applications that provide reminders, tracking of progress,

and interactive exercises have been shown to enhance engagement and adherence to physical therapy programs (Schwan et al., 2019). Additionally, incorporating motivational interviewing techniques during physical therapy sessions can help address barriers to adherence and enhance patient motivation to participate in their treatment plan.

4.4.2 Access to Physical Therapy Services

Access to physical therapy services can be a significant issue for individuals with chronic pain, particularly in underserved or rural areas (Edgerton, 2019). Limited insurance coverage, cost constraints, long waiting times for appointments, and transportation barriers can all contribute to reduced access to physical therapy services. This limited access can result in delayed initiation of treatment, inconsistent follow-up care, and disparities in outcomes for individuals with chronic pain. Research by Beattie et al. (2016) reported that individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to receive physical therapy services for chronic pain, highlighting the inequities in access to care.

Initiatives such as telehealth and virtual physical therapy services have emerged as promising solutions to address access barriers. These platforms allow patients to receive remote physical therapy consultations, exercise guidance, and progress monitoring without the need for in-person visits (Courtney, 2017). By leveraging technology, telehealth can increase accessibility and convenience for patients with chronic pain who may face challenges accessing traditional physical therapy services.

4.4.3 Interdisciplinary Approach in Chronic Pain Management

An interdisciplinary approach involving collaboration between physical therapists, physicians, psychologists, and other healthcare providers is crucial in the all-inclusive management of chronic pain (Kumar, 2011). By addressing the mental, physical and social issues resulting from pain, interdisciplinary care can improve outcomes and enhance the overall well-being of patients. Kinney et al. (2020) demonstrated that a multidisciplinary pain management program incorporating physical therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and medication management led to significant improvements in pain severity and functional results in individuals with chronic musculoskeletal pain.

The integration of physical therapy into interdisciplinary pain management programs allows for a holistic approach to addressing the complex nature of chronic pain. To supplement the treatments offered by other healthcare professionals, physical therapists may provide customized exercise regimens, manual therapy methods, and education on pain management measures (Chimenti, 2018). By working collaboratively within a team-based care model, physical therapists can contribute their expertise in movement analysis, biomechanics, and functional rehabilitation to optimize outcomes for individuals with chronic pain.

4.5 Future Directions and Recommendations

4.5.1 Areas for Further research on physical therapy in chronic pain management

Even while the current body of research on physical therapy's function in managing chronic pain is encouraging, there are still a number of areas that need further study (Kumar, 2011). Examining the efficiency of various physical therapy approaches and modalities in treating certain kinds of chronic pain is one direction that future research may go. For instance, research comparing the effects of exercise treatment and manual therapy for individuals with lower back pain might be carried out (Pergolizzi, 2020).

Furthermore, further investigation is required to ascertain the ideal frequency and length of physical therapy sessions for various chronic pain problems. This might assist medical professionals in customizing treatment regimens to meet the requirements and preferences of

each patient, hence enhancing overall results (Chimenti, 2018).

The long-term effects of physical therapy on the treatment of chronic pain represent another relevant subject for further investigation. Long-term patient follow-up studies may provide important information on the durability of pain treatment from physical therapy therapies (Shipton, 2018).

4.5.2 Strategies to improve the integration of physical therapy into pain management plans

To enhance the integration of physical therapy into pain management plans, healthcare providers can employ several strategies. First, interdisciplinary collaboration between physical therapists, physicians, and other healthcare professionals is essential for ensuring comprehensive and coordinated care for patients with chronic pain (Pergolizzi, 2020). This can involve regular communication, shared decision-making, and joint treatment planning to optimize outcomes.

Furthermore, education and training programs for healthcare providers can help increase awareness of the benefits of physical therapy in chronic pain management (Roditi, 2011). This can involve workshops, seminars, and continuing education courses to update professionals on the latest evidence-based practices in physical therapy for chronic discomfort.

Healthcare organizations can also implement policies and guidelines that promote the usage of physical therapy as a first-line cure for chronic pain (Coronado, 2017). This can help reduce the reliance on pharmacological interventions and invasive procedures, leading to more cost-effective and sustainable pain management strategies.

4.5.3 Patient education and empowerment in utilizing physical therapy for chronic pain

Patient education and empowerment play a crucial role in the successful utilization of physical therapy for chronic pain management (Gellhorn, 2012). Healthcare providers should take the time to educate patients about the benefits of physical therapy, including improved physical function, reduced pain levels, and enhanced quality of life.

Patients should be actively involved in setting goals and developing personalized treatment plans in collaboration with their physical therapists (Kurklinsky, 2016). This shared decision-making approach can increase patient motivation and adherence to the prescribed exercise and rehabilitation programs.

Moreover, healthcare providers can leverage technology to enhance patient education and engagement in physical therapy for chronic pain (Pullen, 2017). These tools can provide patients with access to resources, exercise videos, and progress tracking features, empowering them to take an active role in their recovery process.

5. Conclusion

The study's findings, taken together, provide compelling evidence for the application of physical therapy in the treatment of chronic pain. Exercise, manual therapy, and education are examples of physical therapy therapies that have proven to be successful in lowering pain, promoting physical function, and increasing the quality of life for people with chronic pain problems. Physical therapy is an invaluable tool in the multidisciplinary care of chronic pain because of its comprehensive approach, which treats the psychological as well as the physical components that contribute to chronic pain. Physical therapy is a safe and effective treatment option for chronic pain, and its minimal risk of side effects is more evidence in favor of this. In order to optimize results and enhance quality of life, future research needs to investigate the best practices for incorporating physical therapy into the all-encompassing treatment of patients with chronic pain problems.

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