

# Why Choose Virtual Physical Therapy?

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## Virtual Physical Therapy

is a viable solution for extending care to remote workers and can be used to treat a range of musculoskeletal conditions. In addition to improving access, virtual physical therapy can:



Increase early interventions, reducing downstream costs associated with delayed care.



Facilitate member education, empowering individuals to manage their health.



Improve adherence to care, eliminating barriers and creating a convenient way for employees to reduce pain fast.



Reinforce evidence-based approaches to musculoskeletal care, improving clinical outcomes.



## Current State of Physical Medicine

A large portion of healthcare spending in the United States—higher than anywhere in the world—is for musculoskeletal pain. A key solution for both cutting costs and getting members feeling better faster is early access to treatment. For instance, with low back pain—one of the most common complaints—early intervention is critical. Most episodes of low back pain will resolve within a few weeks with active management strategies from a physical medicine provider, like a physical therapist or a chiropractor.



**126.5 million**  
Americans with an  
MSK disorder



**\$213 billion**  
in annual treatment costs for  
MSK disorders in the U.S.



**1 in 3 adults**  
affected by neck  
and back pain



**#1 claim (in \$)**  
for long-term  
disability claims

Musculoskeletal pain issues are significant to employers, too, who spend about \$20 billion a year on musculoskeletal disease treatment. Recognizing that early access to musculoskeletal care keeps employees healthy, many large corporations have added onsite physical medicine services to their primary facilities, a move that has reduced claim dollars and employees' time away from work.<sup>1</sup>



## The Future Of Physical Medicine

What if treating conditions like back pain could happen in-person when hands-on treatments are essential and virtually when physical manipulations aren't the quickest route for member progress? A scenario with this flexibility and digital reach is the future of physical medicine. Virtual physical therapy can provide access to comprehensive care that activates and empowers members to manage their symptoms through exercise and active treatments. More than just a Skype call, virtual physical therapy embodies all aspects of sound musculoskeletal care: in-depth history-taking, exploration for the cause of the member's symptoms, customized treatments based on a thorough and thoughtful virtual exam, the supervised use of rehab tools, and customized member education.

Virtual PT extends the member-provider relationship beyond the in-person, and sometimes challenging, scheduling of appointments. Physical therapists working in virtual settings interact with members digitally both during and in between visits so that members get the most out of their care plan.



Virtual physical therapy can maintain the in-clinic experience of member-provider interaction, including early opportunities for member education. Already, many of the practitioners who offer virtual physical therapy services apply the same mechanical diagnosis algorithm used in their clinics to the virtual environment, where they can provide real-time assessment and treatment to members at home and at work. Using mechanical assessments, physical medicine specialists can assess a member's pain and response to movement and prescribe exercises for reducing pain.

Research on virtual physical therapy has found that it is a comparable alternative to real-time interaction, with the potential to positively influence downstream impact for payers, including lower costs, reduced imaging, fewer surgeries, and improved outcomes.



# Benefits Of Virtual Physical Therapy

Virtual physical therapy offers multiple benefits, including improved access to care, early intervention and coordinated treatment, improved outcomes and member adherence, and self-management and education.

## Access To Care

Making physical medicine treatment and education accessible to all employees, no matter where they are, is an urgent opportunity with global reach. A recent call-to-action piece in *The Lancet* asks providers, governments, and employers to begin addressing the global crisis of low back pain, which is the leading cause of years lost to disability worldwide.<sup>2</sup> As a recent study demonstrates, an important solution is early access to physical therapy, which leads to better outcomes for members and downstream cost savings.<sup>5</sup> Virtual physical therapy makes this kind of access possible.

## Early Intervention

Improved access to musculoskeletal care via virtual physical therapy increases the likelihood for earlier interventions. When a member who may have otherwise avoided or delayed seeking care gets to talk to a specialist quickly, they reduce the chance that acute conditions, like low back pain, will become chronic conditions. They also learn how to prevent recurrences.<sup>3</sup>

Imaging		Surgery		Prescription Meds	
Early	Delayed	Early	Delayed	Early	Delayed
\$473.32	\$807.20	\$1018.88	\$2760.62	\$80.41	\$116.83

*Healthcare costs during an 18-month follow-up period for members who received early vs. delayed physical therapy. Adapted from Fritz et al., 2012.*



## Benefits Of Virtual Physical Therapy

For employers, early interventions for musculoskeletal treatment through rehabilitation services mean reduced spending for healthcare, including decreased costs associated with imaging, surgery, and prescription medications like opioids.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

When managed properly, virtual care allows physical medicine specialists to better coordinate treatment and reach those members who would have never consulted with a physical medicine specialist for their pain management without a virtual option. Virtual care allows specialists to triage members in a more acute setting. Providing high-level physical medicine care at the right time to the appropriate members can reduce dependence on in-person care, making it more accessible to those requiring hands-on treatment. Risk stratification tools, like the StaRT Back Tool, help specialists identify members who might benefit from immediate telehealth services, like member education and exercise instruction, who do not require an in-person visit.

Virtual triage makes in-person treatment more accessible to members who require hands-on manipulations.

### Outcomes & Adherence

As virtual physical therapy has become more visible, more medical stakeholders are asking about the evidence: does virtual physical therapy improve clinical outcomes? Virtual physical therapy offers a high-value experience, with results on par with an in-clinic visit. Research has demonstrated that virtual physical therapy has positive effects on physical function, disability, and pain,<sup>7</sup> as well as cognitive function and functional independence.<sup>8</sup> For example, members being treated by a telehealth program following total knee replacement surgery demonstrated improved pain and function similarly to in-person physical therapy. The telehealth program was also more cost-effective.<sup>9</sup>

In a study conducted with firefighters suffering from back pain, **patients in a web-based group experienced less lost work time than those in the control group receiving in-person care;** for each hour of work time lost by the web-based group, the control group lost 5.51 hours.<sup>10</sup>



## Benefits Of Virtual Physical Therapy

The Cleveland Clinic demonstrated that a combination of telemedicine visits and use of Reflexion's Virtual Rehabilitation Assistant (VERA) System resulted in "associated savings in time, steps, and money for members, providers and payers" for members recovering from knee replacement surgery at home.

Telehealth care options have also been shown to promote adherence so that once a member is given a treatment plan, they stick to it. One study found that phone call check-ins encouraged members with chronic neck pain to adhere to a neck stretching program, resulting in less pain.<sup>11</sup> Members experiencing chronic knee pain who received a 12-week digital care program demonstrated improvements in KOOS pain and function and maintained these improvements six months after beginning the program.<sup>12</sup>

Virtual physical therapy in musculoskeletal care is still relatively new, but the evidence so far has been overwhelmingly positive. As specialists continue to explore the possibilities for virtual care, they will gain more insight into those interactions that require hands-on treatment, those where virtual treatment is the best avenue for clinical improvements, and those that require just the right mix of virtual and hands-on approaches to improve member health.

### **Self-Management & Education**

Members are often surprised to learn that sometimes the best musculoskeletal treatment isn't a hands-on manipulation; it's customized member education. Among the factors leading to poor prognosis are not only high initial pain but also member fear of movement and lack of confidence in knowing when and how to move.<sup>15</sup> Virtual physical therapy can allow for more rapid access to resources like exercise instruction and self-management techniques that allow members the information they need to take control of their health.



## Benefits Of Virtual Physical Therapy

The best musculoskeletal treatment is customized member education.

Virtual care has also prevented members from experiencing fear and stress surrounding an injury, responses that often worsen pain. One study demonstrated that telehealth communications reduced fear of re-injury and catastrophizing in members with acute whiplash, who were provided treatment education via e-mail and customized behavioral medicine interventions.<sup>13</sup> Early, customized care can educate members on misinformed beliefs about resting, avoiding usual activities, and missing work due to pain.

### Conclusion

Virtual physical therapy in musculoskeletal care is still relatively new, but the evidence so far has been overwhelmingly positive. For those employers looking to extend musculoskeletal benefits to more employees, virtual physical therapy is an effective avenue for activating employee health.

### Comprehensive Physical Medicine at Crossover Health

Crossover Health is the leader in onsite, nearsite, and virtual comprehensive digital-first integrated primary care. Crossover's Physical Medicine team uses technology and data to help identify the optimal care pathway as well as most appropriate mode of care delivery for each member. Our innovative model is designed to improve access to care, maximize therapy outcomes, and reduce the total cost of care.

#### For more information:

[crossoverhealth.com](https://crossoverhealth.com)

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