

# Managing Workplace Pain

## Six Powerful Ways Technology Can Help



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The pain management and opioid crisis is hitting Hoosiers in significant ways. In addition to the human toll, employers are feeling the impact on their bottom lines. A recent Indiana Business Research Center study reports that opioid misuse is costing Indiana more than \$4 billion annually.

Why so high? For starters, pain and opioid addiction increases absenteeism, presenteeism and medical costs in the workplace. Also, expenditures for treatment are increasing. Nationally, pain of the spine, neck, hip and other joints costs an estimated \$183.5 billion annually to treat.

What are the factors driving up pain treatment costs? Poorly coordinated and unnecessary care; overuse of high-cost and high-risk pain-masking pharmacologic therapies and/or surgery as a first line of care; inadequate attention to the psycho-social aspects of pain; and underuse of technology-enabled interventions.

How can employers get their arms around the costs and other impacts of pain at their worksites? There are a growing number of options that include comprehensive, multi-modal programs and – equally important – technology-driven care interventions.

How can technology help?

For too long, pain has been managed in silos of care, with desperate patients drifting from one silo to the next hoping for a different result. Today's comprehensive pain management programs can provide a structured, technology-centered ecosystem that surrounds employees with coordinated care options and educates them through ongoing digital touchpoints, such as mobile phone reminders and practical action steps to improve likelihood of recovery. These programs offer the right tools at the right time to help employees better understand their pain and the options for managing it.

These six technology-driven solutions can help employers develop a responsive and efficient workforce pain management strategy:

**1. Digital Health Platforms.** What if employees could be connected to pain management resources whenever and wherever they need them? Today, they can. The key lies in mobile and desktop applications that cater to a broad spectrum of pain management needs.

Such health platforms might include digital content libraries focused on helping individuals understand how to effectively respond to pain; interactive online resources, such as exercise “how to” videos or step-by-step, actionable ways to improve safe movement; access to credentialed acupuncture, chiropractic, massage and physical therapy providers that offer evidence-based options for treatment of pain; and access to cognitive behavioral training (CBT), which can address the behavioral factors, pain perceptions and poor coping strategies that can contribute to functional impairment.

By allowing employees to understand all of their options and choose from a wide range of services when they need them, they can more quickly engage and are more likely to stick with the options that are most helpful. A 2017 Gallup poll indicated that 78% of Americans would prefer that their doctor recommend a non-pharmaceutical option first.

**2. Data Gathering and Clinical Algorithms That Push Clinical Content and Guidelines.** While there are many apps in the market today that can push continuous reminders to individuals to take action (take more steps, drink more water, etc.), a vital component for achieving improved pain management outcomes lies in first understanding the person's pain situation and then sending the right messaging at the right time. To achieve this, pain management programs must gather vital health status and behavioral perceptions about pain via a personal profile.

Right from the start, a good pain management program will seek to understand basic information such as: a person's pain threshold; physical capabilities and limitations (e.g., how far they can walk or how long they can sit); what therapies they may have tried; and their goals and fears. Through smart feedback, digital pain management platforms can serve up appropriate, targeted clinical content or therapies that will have the greatest impact on a person's quality of life.

**3. Responsive Digital Roadmap.** Fitness devices and apps encourage and nudge people along to help them meet their stated fitness goals. Pain management apps can provide ongoing reminders, challenges or goals to help those in pain take the steps they need to improve. For example, a person who has set a goal to walk a block or climb their staircase can be sent specific messaging designed to encourage them along, give them walking or balance tips, or provide insights on how to use mindful meditation to help control their fears about walking or climbing.

As goals are met, a responsive digital roadmap shows them their completed activities and feeds them new content to take them to their next goal. Such continuous engagement is proven to help support short- and long-term behavior change.

**4. Human-Assisted Digital Coaching.** Another

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important feature of a digital pain management program is a trained human coach. Coaches monitor the digital tools as well as message centers to ensure that the right information is sent to meet the needs of each participant. If red flags or alerts are triggered, the coach will enhance information from the digital platform, such as a need for referral to a physician.

Pain management coaches who support the digital experience provide personalized recommendations and protocols, along with extra encouragement, to help individuals stay motivated, learn about evidence-based treatment options and understand exercise-based choices.

**5. Digitally Delivered CBT.** For individuals who have been living with chronic pain for a while and may be stuck in old habits or fears, employers should consider programs that offer pain management based in cognitive behavioral training. This process for pain management uses digital messaging and feedback to deliver simple CBT-based action steps that can help address fear of movement and stressors that are preventing productive pain management actions.

CBT-based content can help employees reframe and relearn how they think about pain, overcome fear of movement, try new behaviors and celebrate small victories. The advantage of having such messages and action steps delivered digitally is that employees are able to effectively respond to pain any time, from any place.

**6. Wearable Devices.** Wearable fitness devices can help employees monitor their increasing levels of activity in real time or log into a program to see their growth. Such devices also serve as personal cheerleaders, engaging wearers with ongoing motivational and reward-focused messages that can stimulate new goal setting to increase movement and exercise.

Depending on the impact of pain in your workforce, one of these six strategies – or a turnkey program that includes a comprehensive ecosystem of resources to support individuals suffering from pain – can have positive health consequences for your employees and significant financial benefits for your company.