



Home Programs

Your risk doesn't end when your patient leaves your side

Part 1 – Patients who use electrophysical agents (EPAs) at home: Recommendations to increase patient safety and mitigate physiotherapist risk

Physiotherapists commonly use electrophysical agents (EPAs) such as hot packs, ice packs, TENS, and ultrasound in treatment. While you can be relatively confident of your patient's safety when they're under your watchful eye, what happens when these same patients complement your treatment with equipment they can use at home?

It's not uncommon for patients to self-treat using things like portable TENS units, paraffin wax baths, ice packs, muscle stimulators and home ultrasound machines. Many of these products can be purchased either online or at local retailers for a reasonable cost. It's important to know that your liability doesn't disappear when your patient leaves your side; you can also be held liable for injuries that occur when your patient is carrying out their home program. This means that if your patient sustains a burn from their home ultrasound machine, for instance, they could file a claim against you alleging negligence. Your patient may allege that you failed to thoroughly instruct them on contraindications, precautions, proper use of the equipment, or other "standard of care" expectations. If the claim is successful, you could become responsible for financially compensating your patient for any damages they are awarded.

If you are aware that your patient is using EPAs at home or if you have recommended that they do so, you should protect yourself and your patient by outlining any risks, contraindications, or precautions related to the treatment. Think about the steps that you follow when using these modalities in treatment and convey these to your patient. This includes advising your patient to check their skin integrity prior to, during, and following the treatment, and to monitor their comfort level throughout. They should also be advised to stop/discontinue treatment if they experience any unanticipated or adverse reactions, and you should discuss follow-up options to address these responses.

Not only does your patient need to know how to safely use their home equipment, they should also know how to maintain it. Instruct your patient to inspect and monitor the safety of the equipment they are using and advise them to follow the maintenance recommendations outlined by the manufacturer. They should immediately discontinue use of faulty or unsafe equipment.

And don't forget to document these conversations in your patient's chart. If a claim is made against you, your insurance adjuster will rely on this clinical record to identify the level of patient care that you provided. Thorough documentation is key to successfully defending a claim.

For further information on safe practice when using EPAs, you should review **Electrophysical Agents: Contraindications and Precautions**, published in the 2010 special issue of **Physiotherapy Canada**, volume 62, number 5.

Stay tuned for Part 2 – Risks associated with home exercise programs

For further information on reducing practice risk, including when using EPAs in clinical practice, please access CPA's Risk Management resources at <http://physiotherapy.ca/risk> or contact one of our professional staff at risk@physiotherapy.ca.

