

COVID-19 Quick Canadian Physiotherapist Survey: Summary of the second (May 29-June 1 2020) pan-Canadian survey of physiotherapists' experiences with COVID-19

On Friday May 29, BC-Primary Health Care Research Network launched the Cycle 2 of the bi-weekly COVID-19 Quick Canadian Physiotherapist Survey. An email invitation to participate was distributed to physiotherapists through provincial professional associations and divisions, as well as via Twitter, and personal networks. The survey remained open until June 1 at 11:59pm PST.

Sample: 1,245 physiotherapists responded from across Canada. Every province was represented and two territories, with the greatest participation from British Columbia (43%), Quebec (23%), and Ontario (20%). The majority (81%) of physiotherapists reported working in private practice with 33% being clinic owners. Public practice physiotherapists made up 17% of the sample. Over three quarters (77%) of respondents identified as women, nearly one quarter (23%) reported working in a rural setting, 12% worked in a hospital, 52% reported working as part of an interdisciplinary team, and 22% reported that more than half of their patients spoke English or French as a second language.

Main results: Physiotherapists are delivering care to patients while also contributing to the containment and management of COVID-19:

- 76% of physiotherapists are offering modified in-person care
- 74% of physiotherapists are providing care by virtual health; 93% reported using video with 1 out of 3 reporting the use of video for >50% of patients.
- Physiotherapists are currently treating an average of 31% of their normal patient caseload whether in person or virtually
- Only 30% were as confident providing virtual health compared to in-person care

Continued reductions in patient care and high level of stress

- In person care varied from 17% in Newfoundland to 58% in New Brunswick.
- 11% are involved in direct patient care of individuals at extremely high risk or with COVID-19 in the Intensive Care Unit, hospital, long term care facility, or community settings.
- Physiotherapists rated the current level of strain on their practice related to COVID-19 as 4 on a scale from 1=no impact; 5=high impact.
- Sources of stress: 19% were concerned for patients who struggling to use virtual care, 18% worry about the future of their practice, 13% lack PPE or need to reuse or use homemade PPE, and 16% were concerned for the health of patients who do NOT have COVID-19.

Policy Recommendations

Physiotherapists continue to adapt their practice while under significant strain. Many community-based physiotherapists are now providing modified in-person care, yet they continue to offer virtual care. This hybrid model of practice represents new challenges and opportunities for the profession.

As many aspects of the Canadian health care system begin to re-open, physiotherapists can play a valuable role in mitigating the impact of delayed elective surgeries (i.e. hip and knee replacements) and interrupted primary care for chronic conditions. Physiotherapists must be utilized as members of an interdisciplinary team, with expertise in mobility, exercise prescription, and pain management. Patients struggling with chronic conditions and morbidity need to be directed to seek physiotherapy, in-person or by virtual care. Physiotherapists also need ongoing support and guidance from government and health care leaders to manage increased financial and material burdens associated with the pandemic.

Changes in the last two weeks

- Many more physiotherapist are providing modified in-person care, 76% up from 49%.
- Virtual care continues to be offered to patients, 74% (cycle 2) vs. 79% (cycle 1)
- Physiotherapists' caseloads are growing to 31% of pre-COVID-19, up from 27% (cycle 1)
- Physiotherapists' rated their level of strain related to COVID-19 as 4, reduced from 5

384 Physiotherapists provided additional comments:

Financial stress: "The clinic is operating at a reduced capacity of clients as trying to keep the number of clients down in the clinic in order to maintain social distancing and to allow time for increased sanitization between clients." PT#5

Concern for patients' health: "Several patients are not getting therapy because of the pandemic, and they are vulnerable. Their therapy usually happens at their home. They need it but are afraid, and telehealth does not work for them." PT #286

I'm very concerned about patient outcomes after surgery with a lack of access to community PT. PT#101

Increased time on non-patient care tasks: "Extra time spent on adhering to additional cleaning and PPE protocols and reading up on latest information is time not spent on direct patient care." PT#77

"Increased admin time to set up appointments, troubleshoot technical issues connecting with patients" PT#301

Uncertainty about the future: "Concerned that we will have to close up again in the 'second wave' that they tell us is coming" PT#255

Mental health and burnout: "Worry about contracting COVID, despite protective measures." PT#299

"Stressed as having to re-invent physio delivery in both virtual and in-person. Patient expectations have to be managed and level of confidence in virtual is mixed for patients and clinicians." PT#105

Family responsibilities: "Home school and childcare options make my return to work at this time impossible" PT#654