

## Pills



Various drugs are used as alternatives to opioids, including pain-relieving non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, known as NSAIDs; anti-convulsant drugs that manage nerve pain, such as gabapentin; and some over-the-counter drugs such as acetaminophen and aspirin.

Yet “even within these preferred classes there are some concerns to be aware of,” said Silvia Sacalis, a Tampa, Florida-based licensed pharmacist and vice president of clinical services for Healthsystems LLC.

“Even within drug classes that are broadly considered appropriate and cost-effective, there will always be nuances in the management of prescription drug therapies,” Ms. Sacalis said. Costlier “designer” NSAIDs have cropped up in some states, circumventing formulary approval, she added.

Side effects are also an issue, especially for drugs not intended to be taken long term, Mr. Paduda said. Concerns include “potential internal organ damage from overuse of ibuprofen, acetaminophen,” and “there were even some issues with aspirin in terms of tolerance over gastrointestinal issues that could arise,” he said.

“There’s been a number of concerns about those that folks who take a lot of these things can really cause other significant problems,” he said.

Antidepressants in small numbers of prescriptions and medical marijuana, of which data on efficacy, use and costs is lacking, have also been presented as options for managing pain. “Research is largely unchanged” for medical marijuana, which remains a Schedule I drug under the federal government,” Ms. Sacalis said.

## Topical creams

Topical agents have been cited as one of the costliest, fastest-growing options for managing pain for injured workers, but experts have raised numerous concerns about these products over the years.

Nikki Wilson, Omaha, Nebraska-based senior director of clinical pharmacy services at Enlyte LLC, said topicals represent the “top spot among all therapeutic classes” of pain management, with physicians dispensing most of the agents.

“Topical analgesics do have their place in therapy to help manage pain in injured workers, but there are some important factors to consider, which include efficacy, safety and cost,” Ms. Sacalis said.

“Is the product clinically effective for topical use? Are the ingredient levels considered safe by FDA standards? Is there duplication of therapy between the topical ingredient and the injured worker patient’s oral therapy? Is it cost-effective, and if not, is there a cost-effective alternative?”

Workers have also been injured by using topicals, experts say.

“They’re using over-the-counter ingredients (in higher doses) to manufacture these products,” Ms. Hammoud said. “The issue with that is because these are not tested for safety and efficacy, and they’re really high strength, there are some case reports of burns.”



## Talk therapy



Getting injured workers to rethink their pain and applying mental health strategies is another approach experts say is working.

“For the last decade in workers compensation we’ve seen a movement toward holistic injured-worker management, and across the industry there is greater understanding and awareness around the relationship between mental health and its impact on injury, as well as recovery from that injury,” Ms. Sacalis said.

Ms. Wilson said, “Especially chronic or long-term pain can be very complex and often involves a psych component that can further complicate treatment and lead to less favorable outcomes if all aspects of care are not considered.”

Depression, anxiety and/or sleep disturbances can lead to increased pain; therefore, mental components must be addressed, she said.

“The net is that cognitive behavioral therapy and other types of treatments dealing with biopsychosocial issues definitely can have significant results in terms of reducing levels of chronic pain and maintaining that reduction over a long period of time,” Mr. Paduda said.

Access to such care remains a concern, however. Mr. Paduda, who consults for a company using virtual reality to provide cognitive behavioral therapy, said technology has emerged as a solution. Telemedicine has also risen as an approach to bridging the gap.

## Physical medicine

Everything from physical therapy and chiropractic care to alternative programs, such as stretching and yoga to get the injured worker moving, are also viable methods for pain management, experts say.

“Physical modalities, such as strength training and exercise or stretching, can be used in concert with or even as an alternative to pharmaceutical treatment for optimal results,” Ms. Wilson said.

“Even simple things like optimizing a patient’s diet and focusing on foods that can decrease inflammation or lead to better overall metabolic health can have tremendous impacts.”

Problems that have historically inhibited workers from participating in movement-based modalities for managing pain have been fear of re-injury or worse pain, experts said.

The key is to incorporate mental wellbeing, Ms. Hammoud said.

“If you have a combined approach, you have better recovery, because you’re addressing every single modality, instead of just focusing on physical,” she said.

“You’re focusing on the psychotherapy aspect as well, and there’s some really good data that supports the use of (cognitive behavioral therapy) along with physical therapy. ... It is just helping a person understand how to live a better quality of life, or a functional life, and how to manage pain, because technically there’s no cure for pain.”

