



Expanding Access to Pelvic Health Physiotherapy

18 October 2024

RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that the federal government collaborate with provinces and territories to expand equitable access to pelvic health physiotherapy for all Canadians. Expanding access to pelvic health physiotherapy care in Canada will address the growing inequities facing those who experience pelvic floor disorders (PFDs), including pelvic organ prolapse, incontinence, and pelvic pain.

CHALLENGE

Many Canadians continue to face significant challenges to accessing pelvic health physiotherapy, including lengthy wait times and geographic barriers,^[1] which negatively impact those seeking care.^[2]

Despite being established as a first-line treatment for a variety of issues — including cancer rehabilitation and perinatal care — awareness of and access to pelvic health physiotherapy services in the public health care system remains limited and unevenly distributed across communities, further exacerbating inequities.^[3]

The prohibitive costs of incontinence products, combined with limited access to pelvic health physical therapy services, compounds the barriers faced by those experiencing socioeconomic hardship.

As highlighted in a recent position statement from the Canadian Society for Pelvic Medicine (CSPM), “**CSPM recommends pelvic health physiotherapists as effective, accessible, and necessary direct-access health care providers for the management of pelvic health disorders across the lifespan.**”^[4]

OPPORTUNITY

Recognizing these gaps in service provision, there is an urgent need to prioritize policies aimed at increasing the availability of pelvic care physiotherapy services within Canada's public healthcare system and ensuring that all primary healthcare teams are resourced to enable in-person assessments.[5] Virtual interventions could potentially bridge gaps for those in rural and remote communities.[6]

Pelvic health physiotherapy[7] is gaining recognition for its role in improving health outcomes and managing pelvic floor disorders. For example, a recent Ontario Health draft recommendation[8] supports publicly funding pelvic floor muscle training for individuals with incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse, citing evidence that supervised interventions by a physiotherapist lead to improved function and cost savings.

Establishing accessible models to pelvic health physiotherapy will help alleviate pressures on more specialized interventions, such as surgical consultations, and reduce the personal and economic demands associated with these disorders. This will enable Canadians to live healthy, active, and productive lives.

What are 'Pelvic Floor Disorders'?

(adapted from the NICHD – Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development)

Pelvic floor disorders (PFDs) involve issues related to the pelvic floor, a group of muscles that form a supportive sling across the floor of the pelvis. These muscles play a crucial role in holding vital organs — including the bladder, urethra, intestines, and rectum — in place so that they can function. In those with female anatomy, pelvic organs include the uterus, cervix, and vagina.

Common PFDs can include pelvic organ prolapses and bladder issues, the former of which can occur when pelvic musculature can no longer support the organs in that part of a person's body. Additionally, bladder and bowel problems can result if the tissues in the area are weakened or damaged.



BACKGROUND

Access to pelvic health physiotherapy is crucial for Canadians, and offers numerous health benefits, including improved health outcomes, reduced healthcare costs, and increased equality, empowerment, and autonomy. A growing body of evidence shows that interventions provided by a pelvic health physiotherapist should be provided as first-line treatment for those with pelvic floor disorders, prior to exploring other interventions such as pharmaceuticals or surgical procedures.^[9]

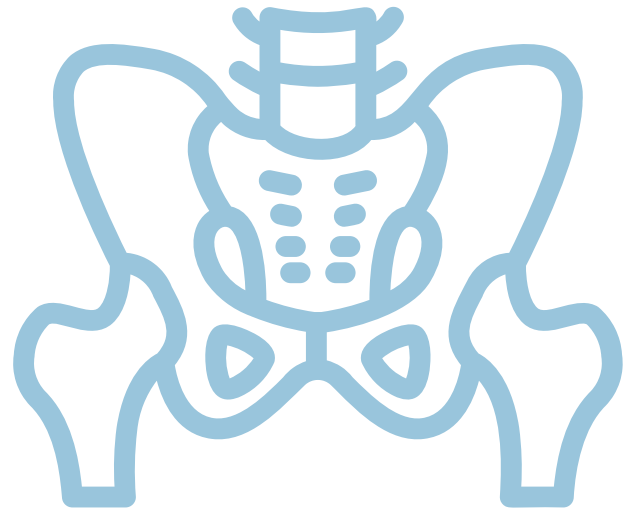
IMPACT

Pelvic floor disorders are highly prevalent, impacting one in four females^[10,11] and primarily affecting individuals with female pelvic anatomy. However, individuals with male anatomy can also suffer from these conditions.^[12]

PFDs can include urinary incontinence, fecal incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse

pelvic pain, sexual problems, and voiding dysfunctions. Research indicates that the prevalence of PFDs increases with age, and given the demographic trends in the Canadian population, this prevalence is anticipated to grow by more than 50% by 2050. This anticipated increase will lead to greater strain on individuals suffering from these conditions and an already burdened healthcare system.^[13]

If improvements to access to pelvic health physiotherapy care are not addressed, individuals suffering from PFDs will continue to experience prolonged wait times to see a limited number of specialists. During this waiting period, they could be receiving optimal care from trained physiotherapy professionals. Trained physiotherapy professionals can provide optimal care, while reducing wait times and the demand for medical specialist consultation and intervention.



SASKATCHEWAN: A MODEL OF SUCCESS

Background

Since 2012, the Saskatchewan Pelvic Floor Pathway^[14] has educated, assessed, and treated thousands of individuals suffering incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse. Publicly funded physiotherapists and nurse practitioners collaborate to provide a shared decision-making approach, allowing individuals to choose physiotherapy, medication, pessaries, and surgical referrals. This model has alleviated the burden on family providers, gynaecologists, general surgeons, and urogynecologists, while enhancing quality of life and independence for individuals across the province.

CPA member Leslie Beck states *“Timely access to care continues to be a concern across all aspects of our health care system. We recognize the need for surgeons to prioritize surgical care. We are part of the solution by offering conservative and evidence-based management to those in need, while referring onwards for those requiring surgical expertise.”*

Carol

Carol, a 73 year old woman from rural Saskatchewan, has struggled with incontinence, making travel to the city and gardening to be a concern. “Being far away from a bathroom is a real problem for me. I always need the toilet,” She explains. At the Regina site of the Saskatchewan Pelvic Floor Pathway, a physical therapist conducted a thorough assessment, reviewing Carol’s history and homework package before performing a physical examination. Together, they developed a personalized treatment plan. After exploring her options, Carol decided to work with the physical therapist on lifestyle measures, such as managing her caffeine intake, as well as engaging in a home exercise program. She met with the nurse practitioner to discuss her medication options. Through a combination of in-person and virtual appointments over four months, Carol experienced significant improvements. “I have been much more comfortable to travel and work in the yard. I have learned so much about my body and have gained confidence. I know I can manage this with the tools I took from the staff.”



APPENDICES

- CPA 2024 : Written submission for the Standing Committee on Finance's Pre-Budget Consultation 2025 https://physiotherapy.ca/app/uploads/2024/07/CPA-2025-Pre-Budget-Submission_August-2024.pdf
- The Role of Physiotherapy Expertise in Women's Health A Submission to the Federal Standing Committee on Health for the Women's Health Study (October 5, 2023) https://physiotherapy.ca/app/uploads/2023/10/CPA_WHD_Submission_HESA_October13_2023.pdf
- CSPM Position Statement [https://www.jogc.com/article/S1701-2163\(24\)00388-8/abstract](https://www.jogc.com/article/S1701-2163(24)00388-8/abstract)

About the Canadian Physiotherapy Association

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association represents physiotherapy professionals, including registered physiotherapists, physiotherapist assistants, physiotherapy technologists and students across Canada. Physiotherapy professionals provide essential expertise, rehabilitative care, and treatment, enabling Canadians to live well and actively participate in all facets of their lives.

For more information

Please review the full CPA **Pre-Budget submission** or contact Kayla Scott, Senior Director of Advocacy at kscott@physiotherapy.ca

CITATIONS

- [1] McLean, L., Pulsifer, J., Keshwani, N., Dumoulin, C., Azer, N., Lazareck-Devlin, A., Dufour, S., Sabourin, J., Faghani, N., Groves, V., Cordova, L., & Sanaee, M. (2024). CSPM Position Statement: The Landscape of Pelvic Health Physiotherapy in Canada. *Journal of obstetrics and gynaecology Canada : JOGC = Journal d'obstetrique et gynecologie du Canada : JOGC*, 46(7), 102565. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jogc.2024.102565>
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] CPA.(5 October 2023). The Role of Physiotherapy Expertise in Women's Health A Submission to the Federal Standing Committee on Health for the Women's Health Study. Retrieved online https://physiotherapy.ca/app/uploads/2023/10/CPA_WHD_Submission_HESA_October13_2023.pdf
- [4] McLean, L., Pulsifer, J., Keshwani, N., Dumoulin, C., Azer, N., Lazareck-Devlin, A., Dufour, S., Sabourin, J., Faghani, N., Groves, V., Cordova, L., & Sanaee, M. (2024). CSPM Position Statement: The Landscape of Pelvic Health Physiotherapy in Canada. *Journal of obstetrics and gynaecology Canada : JOGC = Journal d'obstetrique et gynecologie du Canada : JOGC*, 46(7), 102565. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jogc.2024.102565>
- [5] Charette M., McLean L. Geographic Accessibility to Pelvic Health Physiotherapy Services Across Ontario: A Geographic Information System Analysis // Physiotherapy Canada. Physiotherapie Canada. 2024.
- [6] Ontario Physiotherapy Association. (June 4, 2024). Draft Recommendation on Pelvic Floor Muscle Training for Stress Urinary Incontinence, Fecal Incontinence, and Pelvic Organ Prolapse. p. 5.
- [7] Physiotherapists practicing pelvic health are required to practice within their individual level of competence, ensure that they are authorized to perform a given procedure and must comply with all relevant provincial/territorial legislation and regulatory requirements. Depending on the jurisdiction, this may include rostering/being on a registry for a controlled act, acquiring a minimum standard of training and/or certification beyond entry to practice requirements.
- [8] Pelvic floor muscle training for stress urinary incontinence, fecal incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse. Recommendation: Month 2024. Retrieved online <https://www.hqontario.ca/Portals/0/Documents/evidence/open-comment/recommendation-pelvic-floor-muscle-training-for-stress-urinary-incontinence-fecal-incontinence-and-pelvic-organ-prolapse-draft-2405-en.pdf>
- [9] McLean, L., Pulsifer, J., Keshwani, N., Dumoulin, C., Azer, N., Lazareck-Devlin, A., Dufour, S., Sabourin, J., Faghani, N., Groves, V., Cordova, L., & Sanaee, M. (2024). CSPM Position Statement: The Landscape of Pelvic Health Physiotherapy in Canada. *Journal of obstetrics and gynaecology Canada : JOGC = Journal d'obstetrique et gynecologie du Canada : JOGC*, 46(7), 102565. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jogc.2024.102565>
- [10] Nygaard I, Barber MD, Burgio KL, et al. Prevalence of Symptomatic Pelvic Floor Disorders in US Women. *JAMA*. 2008;300(11):1311–1316. doi:10.1001/jama.300.11.1311
- [11] Wu, J. M., Kawasaki, A., Hundley, A. F., Dieter, A. A., Myers, E. R., & Sung, V. W. (2011). Predicting the number of women who will undergo incontinence and prolapse surgery, 2010 to 2050. *American journal of obstetrics and gynecology*, 205(3), 230.e1–230.e2305. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajog.2011.03.046>
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- [13] Charette M., McLean L. Geographic Accessibility to Pelvic Health Physiotherapy Services Across Ontario: A Geographic Information System Analysis // Physiotherapy Canada. Physiotherapie Canada. 2024
- [14] Saskatchewan Health Authority. (2024). Pelvic Floor Pathway. Retrieved online <https://www.saskhealthauthority.ca/your-health/conditions-diseases-services/pelvic-floor-pathway> Case study kindly contributed by Leslie Beck, BScPT, Physical Therapist