

Virtual Musculoskeletal Solutions

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Background on PHTI's Report on Virtual Musculoskeletal Solutions

Persistent pain in the lower back, hips, knees, and other areas of the body ranks among the most common causes of disability worldwide, affecting patients' quality of life and ability to work. Such problems can result from injuries, repetitive motion or strain, and osteoarthritis that affects muscles, bones, joints, and connective tissues. Studies estimate that at least one in three people in the United States is impacted by musculoskeletal (MSK) disorders.

Physical therapy, or PT, can reduce pain, improve mobility, and lower the likelihood of needing surgery or opioid medications. You are probably familiar with in-person PT, which requires you to go to a provider's office, often multiple times per week, to perform supervised exercises and other treatments to help manage your pain and improve mobility.

Some companies now offer virtual MSK programs that provide similar PT treatments through smartphone-based apps or tablets. Some of these programs offer live interactions with a licensed physical therapist through video or chat, but they primarily use on-body motion trackers and/or the camera on your phone/computer to provide tailored feedback and coaching, typically with AI-powered analysis.

At the Peterson Health Technology Institute (PHTI), we selected eight of these virtual MSK solutions for evaluation to understand how well they work. PHTI is an independent, nonprofit organization that conducts rigorous, evidence-based evaluations of digital health tools. To conduct our assessment, we looked at the research and spoke with doctors, patients, and the companies that make these solutions.

What We Found

- 1** For people with MSK conditions, completing PT (either in-person or virtually) can improve health outcomes more than usual care including doctors' visits, pain management, and healing naturally.
- 2** For most people and conditions, many virtual MSK solutions provide similar improvements in pain and function compared with in-person PT.
- 3** Patients reported high levels of satisfaction with virtual MSK solutions. Those who performed their PT virtually completed about one additional session per week compared to those who had to show up in person for therapy, and they were just as adherent to their treatment plans overall after 12 weeks.
- 4** Virtual MSK solutions offer increased access to quality care. For people who cannot readily access PT due to work schedules, family obligations, mobility limitations, or transportation challenges, virtual MSK solution with higher levels of clinician involvement could be a good alternative.

What It Means for You

For those who prefer hands-on supervision, in-person PT may still be the best choice for managing your MSK disorder. But for patients who may have a hard time getting to in-person PT or have a personal preference for PT at home, virtual solutions are worth considering.

You should first discuss with your doctor or physical therapist whether starting a virtual MSK program may be beneficial for you.

You can share [PHTI's research](#) with your doctor to help them understand which programs have solid research to back their claims and which ones don't.

Costs

If your doctor recommends a program, you may be able to access it through your employer or health plan for free. If not, many programs offer a self-pay option.

Accessing PHTI's Full Report

You can access the full report [here](#).

