

# PHYSICAL THERAPIST'S KNOWLEDGE, BELIEFS, AND PRACTICES RELATED TO OBESITY PREVENTION AND SCREENING FOR PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL ADOLESCENTS WITHOUT KNOWN DISABILITY



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## Abstract

**Background:** Childhood obesity is one of the leading causes of poor health within communities across the United States; however, best practices to manage and/or prevent this chronic condition are still unclear. **Purpose:** This survey aimed to understand attitudes and beliefs of physical therapists participating in obesity screening services at local middle schools. **Methods:** The design was an online survey with questions addressing physical therapists' attitudes, beliefs, values, and feasibility. Licensed physical therapists (PTs) in Louisiana were emailed to complete a survey using RedCap. **Results:** The overall response rate was 2.9% with a survey completion rate of 87%. Nearly 93% of respondents agreed that there should be an annual health/fitness screen in public middle schools. 45 out of 81 responses agreed PTs could perform adolescent health screens without physician referral. **Discussion / Conclusion:** Louisiana physical therapists responding to this survey agreed that PTs can play a role in combating adolescent obesity through health and fitness screening, education, and promoting healthy behaviors. However, the same respondents believe that the general population currently does not consider PTs a primary healthcare provider for assessing and managing adolescent obesity. Despite the plethora of knowledge and expertise in adolescent obesity, physical therapists are not currently consulted as a primary healthcare provider option.

## Introduction

- Childhood obesity is a condition in which a child is significantly overweight for his or her height and age and is a growing public health problem globally, particularly in the United States.
- Childhood obesity often leads to obesity in adulthood and contributes to the development of diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease at a younger age.
- Currently, despite the continual rise in childhood obesity rates, a clear treatment strategy does not exist.
- Many researchers have focused on preventative care and few studies have explicitly targeted treatment for childhood obesity.
- Presently, the burden falls into the hands of primary care practitioners whose clinical judgment leads to parent or caretaker education and persuasion of nutrition and lifestyle modifications.
- Reforms within the school system have also been implemented to address childhood obesity but have rarely been successful.
- Physical therapists are often called upon to promote physical activity and healthy lifestyles in the adult population.
- In more recent years, the healthcare system has shifted focus from chronic disease management to disease prevention and health promotion within populations.
- The APTA's Vision 2020 was originally established in 2000 and included a goal stating the importance of recognizing PTs as providers of health promotion, wellness, and risk reduction programs.

## Introduction Cont.

- Pediatric obesity can be addressed by physical therapy-centered programs using various strategies such as education on the importance of engaging in regular physical exercises, maintaining a healthy weight to prevent diseases, and abstaining from unhealthy practices such as smoking, drinking, and consuming unhealthy foods.<sup>7</sup>
- There is a need for the physical therapy profession to provide health promotion and obesity prevention services in the pediatric population.
- Physical therapists can provide health screens in public schools, including assessment of BMI, cardiovascular endurance, musculoskeletal strength, and coordination.

## Methods

### Participants

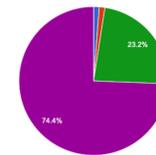
- Licensed physical therapists that receive email correspondence from the Louisiana Board of Physical Therapy in Louisiana were recruited to complete a survey.
- The survey was designed to better define the role of physical therapists in adolescent obesity prevention and management.
- Inclusion criteria comprised of licensed physical therapist currently practicing in Louisiana.
- Exclusion criteria encompassed physical therapists who are no longer practicing in Louisiana.

### Methods

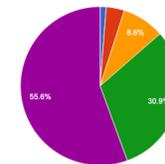
- The design was a qualitative survey that consisted of the following question types: nine "yes or no", two "select all that apply", three "agree/disagree", four "Likert scale", and one "select one".
- All questions were closed ended however two of the "yes/no" questions were only answered if the participant chose a certain answer for the previous question.
- The data collected from the survey was de-identified and stored on an encrypted protected file to maintain confidentiality.
- The constructs used to create the questions included the prevalence of adolescent obesity, management of adolescent obesity, physical therapists' role in population health, and physical therapists' role in adolescent obesity prevention and management.
- The survey questions addressed physical therapists' attitudes, beliefs, values and feasibility criteria.
- The recruitment group email containing the survey link remained available for 2 weeks after the day it was sent.
- The primary purpose of the survey was to determine attitudes and beliefs of physical therapists on providing adolescent obesity screenings within public schools.
- The secondary purpose was to provide supporting evidence of the inclusion of physical therapists in adolescent obesity prevention and management interventions.

## Results

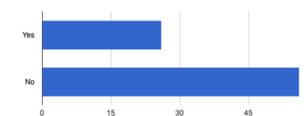
- FIGURE A: 75% of participants agreed that physical therapists have a role in preventing chronic disease by promoting healthy behaviors, screening for general fitness level, and providing exercise prescription.



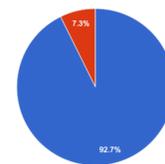
- FIGURE B: Over 50% of participants strongly agreed and 30% agreed with the statement that physical therapists can perform general health screens on adolescents without medical doctor (MD) referral.



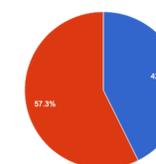
- FIGURE C: Over 50% of physical therapists do not feel as though other healthcare professionals view them as an active participant in combating adolescent obesity.



- FIGURE D: 93% of physical therapists believe that there should be a health screen performed annually within public middle schools.

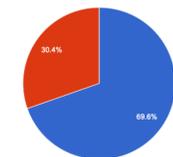


- FIGURE E: 40% of physical therapists are interested in conducting annual middle school health screens.



## Results Cont.

FIGURE F: Almost 70% of physical therapists are willing to educate other middle school professionals on how to perform a comprehensive health screen on adolescents.



## Conclusion

- Most physical therapists view themselves as qualified to perform health screens on both adults and adolescents without additional training or referral from a physician.
- Physical therapists are not clear on the view other medical professionals may have on their role in preventing and treating adolescent obesity.
- Future implementation of an annual middle school obesity screen may be more feasible if a variety of personnel are involved verse physical therapists alone.
- If physical therapists were to complete annual obesity screens on middle schoolers it would require monetary compensation via the local middle schools.

### Limitations

- The method of recruitment led to a sample bias by only including physical therapist's practicing in Louisiana, therefore the conclusions drawn from data analysis do not necessarily represents physical therapists outside of the state.
- Insufficient sample size which made it difficult to report results as being significant for any drawn conclusions.
- Narrowing down the supporting evidence for each question in the survey was difficult due to the immense number of resources and data on adolescent obesity.
- Although our survey was not intended for only pediatric therapist's the use of the word "adolescents" in the survey title may have deterred therapists who mainly worked with the adult population.

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