

## LATEST HEADLINES

## CDC endorses laser therapy as alternative to opioids for pain management



OrthoLazer in Chelmsford treats Bernie Ready of Chelmsford, on Nov. 30, 2021, as a follow-up to knee replacement surgery he had three months earlier. The triangle, which moves around, is where the laser is hitting, but unlike the pink light and cross 'target', the triangle is not visible to the eye, but is picked up by smartphone cameras, so the technicians use their phones to make sure its on. SUN/Julia Malakie

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The 229-page draft, released earlier this month, includes laser therapy for pain management as an alternative to opioid prescription. That's good news according to Dr. Scott Sigman, a surgeon who has pioneered opioid-sparing techniques and the founder of OrthoLazer, a national chain of laser therapy centers that started here in Chelmsford.

"This is long overdue," Sigman said. "The last guidelines the CDC came out with were about five years ago and all they said was reduce the number of opioids you're prescribing. They didn't give good guidance, no alternatives and strategies."

The updated CDC recommendations are a follow-up to guidance released in 2016, which suggested caps on the dosage that doctors should prescribe without offering any alternative pain treatment methods. The 2022 draft is a more user-friendly document and fills in those gaps, giving detailed, granular alternatives, both pharmacological and non-pharmacological, for different types of pain.

One of those alternatives is cold laser therapy, the same treatment OrthoLazer offers. The draft guidelines list low-level laser therapy as being appropriate for chronic back and neck pain.

Laser therapy works by stimulating cellular mitochondria in the treated area, increasing the rate of cell growth and repair and regulating the nerves to send fewer pain signals to the brain. While the Food and Drug Administration has cleared laser therapy for use on patients, the treatment is not well-known and usually not covered by insurance.

Sigman said the CDC's endorsement of the treatment could help more people to see its usefulness.

"These things are going to be highlighted as potential opioid alternatives and recommended for primary care doctors and specialists," he said. "We've had great success with laser, yet it's not something taught in medical schools ... but there's a lot of literature support behind it."

The recognition comes after the therapy was recognized by the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons as being effective in treating osteoarthritic knee pain in November, making this the second national health organization to endorse its use.

Other opioid alternatives listed in the CDC's draft guidance include exercise, physical therapy, massage, yoga, acupuncture and mindfulness practices, among others.

Sigman stressed the guidelines are not meant to eliminate opioid use entirely, because the drugs can be an important tool in treating acute pain. For patients already using opioids with the oversight of a doctor, they should continue taking them as long as they



The CDC guidance is still in draft form, and the public is invited to make comments through April 11. When the recommendations are officially published, they will not be a binding document, but rather a suggestion on how medical professionals deal with opioids.

For Sigman and OrthoLazer, the news comes as the company is expanding. There are currently 11 OrthoLazer centers in the United States, with close to 30 opening soon, including in Newton and Norwood.

Sigman also completed a small clinical study last year at Lowell General Hospital that suggested the treatment may be effective in treating COVID-19-related pneumonia.

“People are drawn to this opioid alternative that’s completely painless. We use it after surgery, for injuries and for chronic problems,” Sigman said. “It’s an exciting time to see that there’s real change in the paradigm about how the federal government is looking at pain and helping our constituents.”

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