

What Is a Physical Therapist?

Today's physical therapist has a lot to offer for patients of all ages.

Chances are, you have already heard of physical therapy. You might have heard from a friend how physical therapy helped get rid of his or her back pain, or you might know someone who needed physical therapy after an injury. You might even have been treated by a physical therapist yourself. But have you ever wondered about physical therapists—who we are and what we do? Read on.

The Essence of Physical Therapy

Although the use of certain techniques of physical therapy goes back to ancient times, the modern profession of physical therapy developed in the twentieth century, in the wake of World War I. The very first modern American physical therapists were trained to work with soldiers returning from the war, and several groups of “reconstruction aides,” as they were then called, actually were sent to military hospitals in France to institute early rehabilitation with wounded veterans.

Today's physical therapist is a direct descendant of these brave women (and a few men). Physical therapists now practice in a wide variety of settings, with patients from all age groups. Many people are familiar with physical therapists' work helping patients with orthopedic problems, such as low back pain or knee surgeries, to reduce pain and regain function. Others may be aware of the treatment that physical therapists provide to assist patients recovering from a stroke in learning to use their limbs and walk again. If you are old enough to remember the mid-century polio epidemics, you might be aware of the important role that physical therapists played in helping people with this disease minimize or overcome its paralyzing effects. Each of these recollections captures the essence of physical therapists. In today's health care system, physical therapists are the experts in the examination and treatment of musculoskeletal and neuromuscular problems that affect peoples' abilities to move the way they want and function as well as they want in their daily lives.

Movement and Function

The ability to maintain an upright posture and to move your arms and legs to perform all sorts of tasks and activities is an important component of your health. Most of us can learn to live with the various medical conditions that we may develop, but only if we are able to continue at our jobs, take care of our families, and enjoy important occasions with family and friends. All of these activities require the ability to move without difficulty or pain.

For some of us, the ability to move is not merely a matter of using our limbs to walk or handle objects. There are cardiac and pulmonary problems that interfere with the body's ability to use oxygen, which is the “fuel” of muscles and movement. Because people of all ages, from the newborn to the very aged, have the need to move and function, physical therapists work with patients across the lifespan. You might see physical therapists working with patients or clients in hospitals (even critically ill patients in the intensive care unit), in nursing homes, in outpatient clinics, in the home, in schools, and on the job.

Because physical therapists are experts in movement and function, they do not confine their talents to treating people who are ill. A large part of a physical therapist's program is directed at preventing injury and loss of movement. Physical therapists work as consultants in industrial settings to improve the design of the workplace and reduce the risk of workers overusing certain muscles or developing low back pain. They also provide services to athletes at all levels to screen for potential problems and institute preventive exercise programs. With the boom in the fitness industry, a number of physical therapists are engaged in consulting with individuals and fitness clubs to develop workouts that are safe and effective, especially for people who already know that they have a problem with their joints or their backs.

Education and Licensure

Because physical therapists are required to understand a vast array of problems that can affect movement, function, and health, all physical therapists are college graduates. The majority of physical therapist education programs graduate students with a master's degree, and a few schools offer a clinical doctorate in physical therapy. All physical therapists also are required to take a national examination and be licensed by the state in which they practice. Some physical therapists seek advanced certification in a

clinical specialty, such as orthopaedic, neurologic, cardiopulmonary, pediatric, geriatric, or sports physical therapy. Others are certified in electrophysiological testing and measurement.

The cornerstones of physical therapist treatment are therapeutic exercise and functional training. In addition to “hands-on” care, physical therapists also educate patients to take care of themselves and to perform certain exercises on their own. Depending on the particular needs of a patient, physical therapists may also “mobilize” or “manipulate” a joint (that is, perform certain types of movements at the end of your range of motion) or massage a muscle to promote proper movement and function. Physical therapists also use methods such as ultrasound (which uses high frequency waves to produce heat), hot packs, and ice. Although other kinds of practitioners will offer some of these treatments as “physical therapy,” it’s important for you to know that physical therapy can only be provided by qualified physical therapists or by physical therapist assistants, who must complete a 2-year education program and who work only under the direction and supervision of physical therapists.

Most forms of physical therapy treatment are covered by your insurance, but the coverage will vary with each plan. (See “The Wise Consumer,” for more on how insurance policies work.) Many people choose to pay for physical therapy directly, even if their policy will not cover their treatment or their benefits have run out. This practice is growing, as most states do not legally require patients to see their physicians before seeing a physical therapist. Thus, in many cases, you have the ability to see a physical therapist when you want to, even if your insurance will not pay for it. Iowa is a direct-access state.

Finding a Physical Therapist

Finding the right therapist for you is much like finding the right doctor or dentist. “Word-of-mouth” recommendations from family or friends are invaluable. In the hospital, a physical therapist will likely pick up your case much the same way as a physician. For outpatient care, physical therapy can be obtained through hospitals, home care agencies, and in private offices.

You can easily find a physical therapist’s office listed in the phone book. If your state law requires that you have a physician’s referral for physical therapy, ask your doctor for one. Be aware that, even if the law requires you to have a referral, you have the right to see the physical therapist of your choice.

Many physical therapists are members of their voluntary professional association, the American Physical Therapy Association. These physical therapists and their physical therapist assistants are especially committed to providing competent and compassionate care, as they are bound by the Association’s Code of Ethics.

Whatever the reason that brings you to a physical therapist, professional care to restore your movement and promote your ability to function at the highest level possible is available. Just ask your physical therapist.

REASONS TO SEE A PHYSICAL THERAPIST — The physical therapist provides services aimed at preventing the onset and/or slowing the progression of conditions resulting from injury, disease, and other causes. The physical therapist provides these services to people of all ages who have functional conditions resulting from back and neck injuries, sprains/strains and fractures, arthritis, burns, amputations, stroke, multiple sclerosis, birth defects such as cerebral palsy and spina bifida, injuries related to work and sports, and others.

Low back pain	Neck pain
Shoulder, arm, wrist, or hand problems	Knee, ankle, or foot problems
Carpal tunnel syndrome Sprains and muscle strains	Arthritis
Cardiac rehabilitation	Rehabilitation after a serious injury
Chronic respiratory problems	Stroke rehabilitation
Problems with balance	Disabilities in newborns
Pre-/ postnatal programs	Hip fractures
Incontinence	Fitness and wellness education

WHAT DO PHYSICAL THERAPISTS EARN?

More than 120,000 physical therapists are licensed in the U.S. today. The median salary for a physical therapist is \$52,000 depending on position, years of experience, degree of education, geographic location, and practice setting.

WHERE DO PHYSICAL THERAPISTS PRACTICE?

Although many physical therapists practice in hospitals, nearly 80 percent practice in:

- Outpatient clinics or offices
- Inpatient rehabilitation facilities
- Skilled nursing, extended care, or subacute facilities
- Homes
- Education or research centers
- Schools
- Hospices
- Industrial, workplace, or other occupational environments
- Fitness centers and sports training facilities

WHAT ARE THE EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR BECOMING A PT?

The minimum educational requirement is a post-baccalaureate degree from an accredited education program. Physical therapy education programs are transitioning to an entry-level Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree. Currently, approximately 200 colleges and universities nationwide offer professional education programs in physical therapy.

WHAT ARE THE LICENSURE REQUIREMENTS FOR BECOMING A PT?

After graduation, candidates must pass a state-administered national exam. Other requirements for physical therapy practice vary from state to state according to physical therapy practice acts or state regulations governing physical therapy.

WHAT IS THE EMPLOYMENT OUTLOOK FOR PHYSICAL THERAPY?

With just a 1.1 percent unemployment rate, physical therapists are now experiencing the best employment conditions since enactment of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997.

The Physical Therapist Assistant

The physical therapist assistant (PTA) is a technically educated health provider who assists the physical therapist in the provision of physical therapy and may perform physical therapy interventions selected by the supervising physical therapist. The physical therapist assistant works under the direction and supervision of the physical therapist, helping manage conditions such as back and neck injuries, sprains/strains and fractures, arthritis, burns, amputations, stroke, multiple sclerosis, birth defects, injuries related to work and sports, and others.

WHAT DO PHYSICAL THERAPIST ASSISTANTS EARN?

The median income for a physical therapist assistant is \$30,000 depending on position, years of experience, degree of education, geographic location, and practice setting.

WHERE DO PHYSICAL THERAPIST ASSISTANTS WORK?

Physical therapist assistants work in a broad range of settings, including the following:

- Hospitals
- Outpatient clinics or offices
- Rehabilitation facilities
- Skilled nursing, extended care, or subacute facilities
- Homes
- Education or research centers
- Schools
- Hospices
- Industrial, workplace, or other occupational environments
- Fitness centers and sports training facilities

WHAT ARE THE EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR BECOMING A PTA?

Physical therapist assistants must complete a two-year education program, typically offered through a community or junior college. Candidates receive an associate's degree upon graduation. The course of study usually includes one year of general education and one year of technical courses on physical therapy procedures and clinical experience. There are 251 accredited physical therapist assistant education programs throughout the country.

WHAT ARE THE LICENSURE REQUIREMENTS FOR BECOMING A PTA?

More than 40 states require physical therapist assistants to be licensed, registered, or certified. States requiring licensure stipulate specific educational and examination criteria.

WHAT IS THE EMPLOYMENT OUTLOOK FOR PHYSICAL THERAPIST ASSISTANTS?

Employment conditions for physical therapist assistants continue to improve. There is currently an unemployment rate of 3.9 percent, down from 4.2 percent in spring 2001.