

WHAT IS A PHYSICAL THERAPIST?

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Physical therapists (PTs) are healthcare providers who are experts in the examination and treatment of problems that affect one's abilities to move and function. These abilities are driven by four major systems in the body – musculoskeletal, neuromuscular, cardiovascular/pulmonary, and integumentary – and PTs are educated and experienced with management of all four. PTs help patients with orthopedic problems such as knee, shoulder, or spine pain, and after surgery to reduce pain and regain function. They also provide treatment for patients with headaches, osteoporosis, arthritis, lymphedema, Parkinson's disease, those recovering from a stroke, or with chronic pain disorders, such as fibromyalgia.

MOVEMENT AND FUNCTION

People of all ages need to move and function, so PTs work with patients and clients from newborns to the very aged. PTs also work in all types of settings, from hospitals, outpatient clinics, and schools, to the home and workplace.

PTs don't confine their talents to treating people who are ill. A large part of a PT's education is directed at preventing injury and loss of movement. For example, PTs consult in industrial settings to improve workplace design and reduce risks of repetitive stress and overuse injuries, such as low back pain and carpal tunnel syndrome.

PTs also provide services to athletes at all levels. PTs screen for potential problems and institute preventative exercise and sport-specific training programs to enhance the athlete's performance. Some PTs consult with individuals and fitness clubs to develop workouts that are safe and effective, especially for people who already know that they have an injury. Certain populations, such as people with chronic diseases (obesity, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or muscular dystrophy) or progressive diseases (Parkinson's disease and Multiple Sclerosis) can also benefit from specialized exercise programs designed by PTs.

SKILLED PROFESSIONALS

PTs are required to understand a vast array of problems that can affect movement, function, and health. PTs are the experts of movement and have extensive knowledge regarding human anatomy and physiology. All physical therapy education programs graduate students with a post baccalaureate degree, and the majority award the clinical doctorate (DPT) in physical therapy. PTs must also pass a national board examination and be licensed by the state in which they practice.

The cornerstones of physical therapy intervention are therapeutic exercise, functional training, and “hands-on” care. PTs also instruct and educate patients regarding methods to take care of themselves and to perform certain exercises on their own. Depending on the particular needs of a patient, a PT's “hands-on” care may include mobilization/manipulation of a joint or facilitation of the arms, legs, or trunk to improve movement and coordination. PTs also use modalities such as electrotherapy and ultrasound. Although other types of practitioners offer some of these treatments, it is important to know that physical therapy can only be provided by a qualified PT or by a PT assistant (PTA). The latter must complete a 2-year college education program and may work only under the direction and supervision of a PT.

Health insurance covers most forms of physical therapy. Many people choose to pay for physical therapy directly, even if their policy does not cover their program or if their benefits have run out. This practice is growing as most states do not require a physician's referral for an individual to see a physical therapist. To find out if your state permits “direct access” to physical therapy services, visit the American Physical Therapy Association's (APTA) web site at www.apta.org.

FINDING A PHYSICAL THERAPIST

You can find a PT who's right for you through recommendations from family or friends, or by checking the telephone listings and doing your own research. One factor to consider is that PTs who are members of the APTA are bound to the APTA's Code of Ethics and are especially committed to providing competent and compassionate care. You can locate APTA member PTs in your area through “Find a PT” at www.apta.org/consumer. Be aware that even if your state requires a physician's referral for physical therapy, you always have the right to see the PT of your choice.

If you have any questions concerning these issues, please do not hesitate to contact us at 818-905-1331. All information contained within this article is intended for educational purposes only and should not be considered medical advice. You should consult with your health care professional for specific advice relating to your medical questions or conditions.