

Physical Therapy

What They Do Physical therapists, sometimes called PTs, help injured or ill people improve their movement and manage their pain.

Duties Physical therapists typically do the following:

- Review patient medical history and any referrals or notes from doctors or surgeons
- Diagnose patient movements by observing them stand or walk and by listening to concerns
- Set up a plan of care for patients, outlining the patient's goals and the expected outcome of the plan
- Use exercises, stretching maneuvers, hands-on therapy, and equipment to ease patients' pain, help them increase their mobility, prevent further pain or injury, and facilitate health and wellness
- Evaluate a patient's progress, modifying a plan of care and trying new treatments as needed
- Educate patients about what to expect from and how best to cope with the recovery process

Physical therapists provide care to people of all ages who have problems resulting from back and neck injuries; sprains, strains, and fractures; arthritis; amputations; neurological disorders, such as stroke or cerebral palsy; injuries related to work and sports; and other conditions

Physical therapists are trained to use a variety of different techniques—sometimes called *modalities*—to care for their patients. These techniques include applying heat and cold and using assistive devices such as crutches, wheelchairs, and walkers and equipment, such as electric stimulation to treat injuries and pain.

The work of physical therapists varies by type of patient. For example, a patient experiencing loss of mobility due to stroke needs different care from that given to an athlete recovering from an injury. Some physical therapists specialize in one type of care, such as orthopedics or geriatrics. Many physical therapists also work at preventing loss of mobility by developing fitness and wellness programs to encourage healthier and more active lifestyles.

Physical therapists work as part of a healthcare team. Physical therapist assistants (sometimes called PTAs) and physical therapist aides work under the direction and supervision of physical therapists. They help patients who are recovering from injuries and illnesses regain movement and manage pain.

Work Environment Physical therapists typically work in private offices and clinics, hospitals, and nursing homes:

Physical Therapy/Rehab offices 33%

Hospitals 28%

Home health care 11%

Nursing homes 7%

Physician Offices 5%

Education Physical therapists need a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree. All states require physical therapists to be licensed. In 2013, there were 218 programs for physical therapists accredited by the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education, all of which offered a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree.

DPT programs typically last 3 years. Most programs require a bachelor's degree for admission as well as specific prerequisites, such as anatomy, physiology, biology, chemistry, and physics. Physical therapist programs often include courses in biomechanics, anatomy, physiology, neuroscience, and pharmacology. Physical therapist students also complete clinical internships, during which they gain supervised experience in areas such as acute care and orthopedic care.

Physical therapists may apply to and complete a clinical residency program after graduation. Residencies typically last about 1 year and provide additional training and experience in specialty areas of care. Therapists who have completed a residency program may choose to specialize further by completing a fellowship in an advanced clinical area.

Most states require physical therapist assistants to have an associate's degree from an accredited physical therapist assistant program. Physical therapist aides generally have a high school diploma and receive on-the-job training.

Licenses All states require physical therapists to be licensed. Licensing requirements vary by state but all include passing the National Physical Therapy Examination administered by the Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy. Several states also require a law exam and a criminal background check. Continuing education is typically required for physical therapists to keep their license. Check with state boards for specific licensing requirements.

After gaining work experience, some physical therapists choose to become a board-certified specialist. The American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties offers certification in eight clinical specialty areas, including orthopedics and geriatric physical therapy. Board specialist certification requires passing an exam and at least 2,000 hours of clinical work or completion of an APTA-accredited residency program in the specialty area

Important Qualities

Compassion. Physical therapists are often drawn to the profession in part by a desire to help people. They work with people who are in pain and must have empathy for their patients.

Detail oriented. Like other healthcare providers, physical therapists should have strong analytic and observational skills to diagnose a patient's problem, evaluate treatments, and provide safe, effective care.

Dexterity. Physical therapists must use their hands to provide manual therapy and therapeutic exercises. They should feel comfortable massaging and otherwise physically assisting patients.

Interpersonal skills. Because physical therapists spend a lot of time interacting with patients, they should enjoy working with people. They must be able to explain treatment programs, motivate patients, and listen to patients' concerns to provide effective therapy.

Physical stamina. Physical therapists spend much of their time on their feet, moving as they work with patients. They should enjoy physical activity.

Resourcefulness. Physical therapists customize treatment plans for patients. They must be flexible and able to adapt plans of care to meet the needs of each patient.

Pay In May 2012, the median annual wage for physical therapist was \$79,860; physical therapy assistant pay was \$52,160; wages for physical therapist aides was \$23,880.

Job Outlook Employment of physical therapists is projected to grow 36 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations.

Demand for physical therapy services will come from the aging baby boomers, who are staying more active later in life than their counterparts of previous generations. Older persons are more likely to experience heart attacks, strokes, and mobility-related injuries that require physical therapy for rehabilitation.

In addition, the incidence of patients with chronic conditions, such as diabetes and obesity, is growing. More physical therapists will be needed to help these patients maintain their mobility and manage the effects of chronic conditions.

Advances in medical technology have increased the use of outpatient surgery to treat a variety of injuries and illnesses. Medical and technological developments also are expected to permit a greater percentage of trauma victims and newborns with birth defects to survive, creating additional demand for rehabilitative care. Physical therapists will continue to play an important role in helping these patients recover more quickly from surgery.

Job opportunities will likely be good for licensed physical therapists in all settings. Job prospects should be particularly good in acute-care hospitals, skilled-nursing facilities, and orthopedic settings, where the elderly are most often treated. Job prospects should be especially favorable in rural areas, because many physical therapists live in highly populated urban and suburban areas.

Employment of physical therapist assistants and aides is projected to grow 41 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. Demand for physical therapy services is expected to increase in response to the healthcare needs of an older population and growing rates of chronic conditions such as diabetes and obesity.

SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2014-15 Edition*, Physical Therapists, on the Internet at: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/physical-therapists.htm> (visited April 02, 2014).

Local Schools

Physical Therapist:

- Rutgers, Camden
- Stockton

Physical Therapy Assistant:

- Mercer County Community College