

About Physical Therapist (PT) Careers

Patients, clients and physicians demand the talents of physical therapists for the management of a wide variety of conditions. Patients and clients pursue physical therapy services so they may benefit from the highly individualized, "hands on" approach that characterizes physical therapist care. Physical therapists examine patients and develop a plan of care that promotes movement, reduces pain, restores function, and prevents disability. The physical therapist works with the patient, family members, and other health care providers to ensure the goals of the plan of care are met and the patient outcomes are optimal.

Therapeutic exercise and functional training are the cornerstones of physical therapist treatment. Depending on the particular needs of a patient and client, physical therapists may "manipulate" a joint (that is, perform certain types of passive movements at the end of the individual's range of motion) or massage a muscle to promote proper movement and function. Physical therapists may use other techniques such as electrotherapy, ultrasound (high-frequency waves that produce heat), hot packs, and ice in addition to other treatments. Physical therapists can also help to prevent the loss of mobility by developing fitness and wellness-oriented programs for healthier and more active lifestyles. [\[a\]](#)

Typical Day of a Physical Therapist

Physical therapist responsibilities include examination, diagnosis, and creation/implementation/adjustment of a plan of care. Patient examinations in physical therapy include, but are not limited to, testing of muscle function, strength, joint flexibility, range of motion, balance and coordination, posture, respiration, skin integrity, motor function, quality of life, and activities of daily living. Physical therapists also determine a patient's ability to reintegrate into the workforce or community after illness or injury. [\[b\]](#)

Once an examination is complete and a diagnosis has been determined, the physical therapist designs a plan of care that includes short- and long-term functional goals and interventions that may include, but not be limited to, exercise, traction, mobilization/manual therapy, ultrasound and/or electrotherapy, vestibular training, motor learning and development, and patient and family education. Interventions will often include the use of assistive and adaptive devices such as crutches, wheelchairs, orthotics, and prosthetics. An important component of physical therapist patient management involves teaching the patient appropriate ways to move or perform particular tasks to prevent further injury and to promote health and wellness.^[c]

What Is It Really Like to Be a Physical Therapist?

Practice Settings

Although many physical therapists practice in hospitals, more than 80% practice in other settings.

Acute Care - In this setting, physical therapy is provided to individuals who are admitted to a hospital for short-term patient care for reasons such as illness, surgery, accident, or recovery from a trauma. The goal in this setting^[d] is to discharge the person as soon as he or she is medically stable and has a safe place to go.

Rehab/Subacute Rehab

- **Rehabilitation Hospital** - In this setting, physical therapy is provided to individuals who are admitted to a facility or rehabilitation unit. The goal in this setting is to provide intense therapy to improve the person's ability to care for himself or herself (typically 3 hours or more per day).
- **Sub-Acute Rehabilitation** - In this setting, physical therapy is provided to individuals who are admitted to a special hospital that provides medical

and/or rehabilitation care. The rehabilitation is less intense (typically less than 3 hours per day).

Extended Care Facility /Nursing Home/Skilled Nursing Facility - In this setting, physical therapy is provided to individuals who are admitted to a facility that typically cares for elderly patients and provides long-term nursing care, rehabilitation, and other services.

Outpatient Clinic (also known as a Private Practice) - In this common physical therapy setting, individuals visit a physical therapist in a clinic, office, or other health care facility primarily to address musculoskeletal (orthopedic) and neuromuscular injuries or impairments.

School/Preschool - In this setting, physical therapy is provided within an educational environment, including preschool, elementary, or secondary education (high school and vocational) facilities.

Wellness/Prevention/Sports/Fitness - In this setting, physical therapy is provided to individuals with a focus on wellness. This approach to health care emphasizes preventing illness and injury and promoting a healthy lifestyle, as opposed to emphasizing treatment of diseases. Settings may include but aren't limited to fitness centers and sports training facilities.

Home Health - In this setting, physical therapy is provided in the patient's place of residence. While the majority of patients are senior citizens, there also are pediatric patients with developmental disabilities and other conditions, and individuals of all ages who need rehabilitation because of injury or other causes. Home care may actually be provided in the patient's residence, the caregiver's home, a hospital emergency room, skilled nursing facility, residential facility, group home, hospice, or elsewhere in the community.

Hospice - In this setting, physical therapy is provided to patients in the last phases of incurable disease so that they may maintain functional abilities for as long as possible and manage pain.

Industrial, Workplace, or Other Occupational Environments - In these settings, physical therapy is provided to individuals primarily to help them return to work or for the purpose of enhancing employee health, improving safety, and increasing productivity in the workplace.

Local, State, and Federal Government - In these settings, physical therapy is provided to civilians and military personnel. PTs are employed by federal agencies, including the Veteran's Health Administration (VHA), Department of Defense, and Indian Health Service (IHS).

Research Center - In this setting, physical therapists and other professionals conduct research to improve patient/client care outcomes and support the body of knowledge in the field physical therapy.

Types of Conditions Treated by Physical Therapists

Explore APTA's official consumer information website, [MoveForwardPT.com](https://www.moveforwardpt.com), to see some the numerous symptoms and conditions treated by physical therapists, which include:

- **Cardiopulmonary** [\[e\]](#)
 - **Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)**
 - **Cystic Fibrosis (CF)**
 - **Post-Myocardial Infarction (MI)**
- **Hand Therapy**
 - **Carpal Tunnel**
 - **Trigger finger**
- **Musculoskeletal**
 - **Back pain**
 - **Rotator Cuff Tear**
 - **TMJ disorders**
- **Neurological**
 - **Stroke**

- Spinal Cord Injury
- Parkinson's Disease
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Vestibular Dysfunction
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Pediatrics ^[f]
 - Developmental Delays
 - Cerebral Palsy
 - Muscular Dystrophy
- Sports Injuries
 - Concussion
 - Tennis Elbow
- Women's Health/Pelvic Floor
 - Lymphedema
 - Urinary Incontinence
 - Wound Care
 - Burns
 - Diabetic Ulcers

Job Satisfaction

Forbes ranked physical therapists as having 1 of " [The Ten Happiest Jobs](#)," according to articles published in 2013 and 2011. CNNMoney.com gave physical therapists a grade of "A" in Personal Satisfaction in 2012, as well as in its "Benefit

to Society” categories. Physical therapists also have high job satisfaction according to the 2007 results of the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center survey, as reported in [The Washington Post](#). More than three-quarters of physical therapists polled reported to be "very satisfied" with their occupations. Physical therapists were second only to clergy and the only health care professionals in the top 5.

Job Outlook

[APTA announced in March 2015](#) that while an increase in graduates from physical therapist (PT^[9]) education programs could help to slightly lower projected workforce shortages in the future, the trend toward increased health insurance coverage nationwide will likely still mean that the demand for PTs will continue to climb between now and 2020.

The projections for shortages echo similar predictions made by [The Conference Board](#) and [Forbe's](#) magazine in 2014, which listed physical therapy as one of the "top 10 jobs in high demand." [US News & World Report](#) has repeatedly included physical therapists among it's best 100 jobs in terms of employment opportunity, good salary, manageable work-life balance, and job security. In 2015 physical therapists were ranked #6 overall and #5 in health care jobs. [CNNMoney.com](#) ranked physical therapy directors as #23 of the 100 "Best Jobs in America" in 2015.

There is a high demand for physical therapists in the workforce. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of physical therapists is expected to grow by 36 percent from 2014 to 2024, much faster than the average for all occupations. While demand for physical therapists varies by geographical region and area of practice, the unemployment rates are low across the country. The need for physical therapists is expected to remain strong into the foreseeable future as the US population ages and the demand for physical therapy services grows.

Salaries

More than 204,000 physical therapists are licensed in the United States today. The median salary for a physical therapist is \$85,000^[h]. Salaries vary based on position, years of experience, degree of education, geographic location, and practice setting. (Source: APTA 2013 Median Income of Physical Therapists Summary Report.)

Licensure

After graduation from an accredited physical therapy education program* candidates must pass a state-administered national exam^[i]. Other licensure requirements for practice vary from state to state according to physical therapy practice acts or state regulations governing physical therapy. Visit the [Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy \(FSBPT\)](#) website for more information about PT licensure requirements.

*The [Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education \(CAPTE\)](#) is the only accrediting agency recognized by the United States Department of Education for PT education programs.

Furthering Your Education After Graduation

Visit the [physical therapist education overview](#) to learn more about residency, fellowship, and clinical specialty opportunities for physical therapists in various practice areas.

Future of Physical Therapy

APTA's vision statement for the physical therapy profession is "Transforming society by optimizing movement to improve the human experience." The guiding principles to achieve the vision demonstrate how the profession and society will look when the vision is achieved.

In Their Words

The inspirational **Defining Moment** column of APTA's *PT in Motion* magazine spotlights a particular moment or incident that led the writer to a career in physical therapy or reinforced why he or she became a physical therapist or physical therapist assistant. Read the columns or download the podcasts.

- [a] develop exercises based on the patients injury
- [b] have a say when the patient goes back to activities rather than the doctor
- [c] teach the patients how to do each movement rather than simply telling them the movement
- [d] the atmosphere varies in each setting and in what physical therapists do in order to accommodate to the patients in the certain setting
- [e] how do they treat cardiopulmonary issues?
- [f] work with mostly children with special needs instead of normal
- [g] become very popular
- [h] average then depending upon how long and how much education
- [i] have to pass test in order to get physical therapy license