

Handy Handouts®

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What is a Physical Therapist?

by Dani Kinsley, M.S., OTR/L



A physical therapist (PT) is a highly-trained medical professional who evaluates and treats children and adults who have movement disorders due to injuries or disabilities. PTs evaluate and treat patients by using hands-on approaches, prescribing exercise, and educating patients.

Most physical therapists currently practicing have earned a masters or doctoral-level (DPT) degree in physical therapy. The DPT degree is now required for all new graduates and requires extensive didactic (classroom) and clinical (hands-on) training. PTs must also pass a standardized board exam and obtain/maintain state licensure to treat patients.

Physical therapists may specialize in a specific area of practice or hold additional certifications. Many physical therapists are also responsible for supervising physical therapy assistants (PTAs) or physical therapy aides across a variety of treatment settings.

What Do PTs Treat?

Physical therapists work with clients to increase health and wellness, safely restore function, and decrease pain. Below is a list of common diagnoses and issues a physical therapist may treat:



- Decreased range of motion (ROM): addressing limitations of joint movement



- Decreased strength and cardiovascular endurance



- Deficits of balance, coordination, and praxis: planning and executing motor (movement) patterns effectively and safely



- Musculoskeletal issues: conditions affecting the bones, cartilage, ligaments, tendons and connective tissues



- Chronic pain or edema (swelling)



- Degenerative disorders: including arthritis, Parkinson's disorder, ALS, osteoporosis, and Huntington's disease



- Post-operative and post-injury recovery: joint replacement, burn care, amputations, spinal cord injuries



- Pelvic floor dysfunction: addressing pain and bowel/bladder incontinence



- Decreased mobility requiring durable medical equipment (DME): including evaluation for wheelchairs, walkers, and other mobility aids



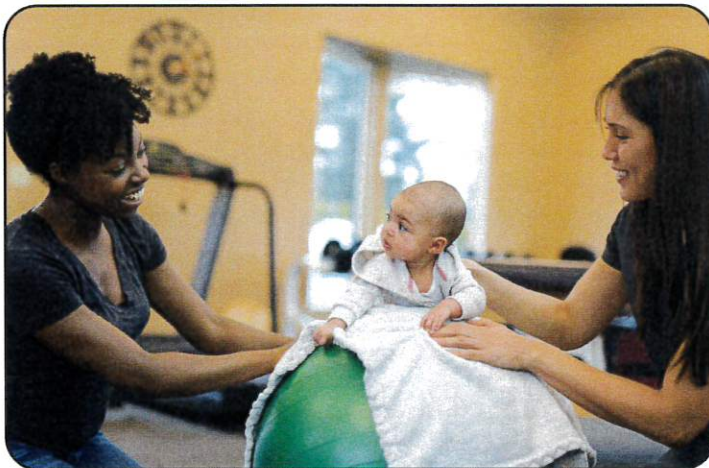
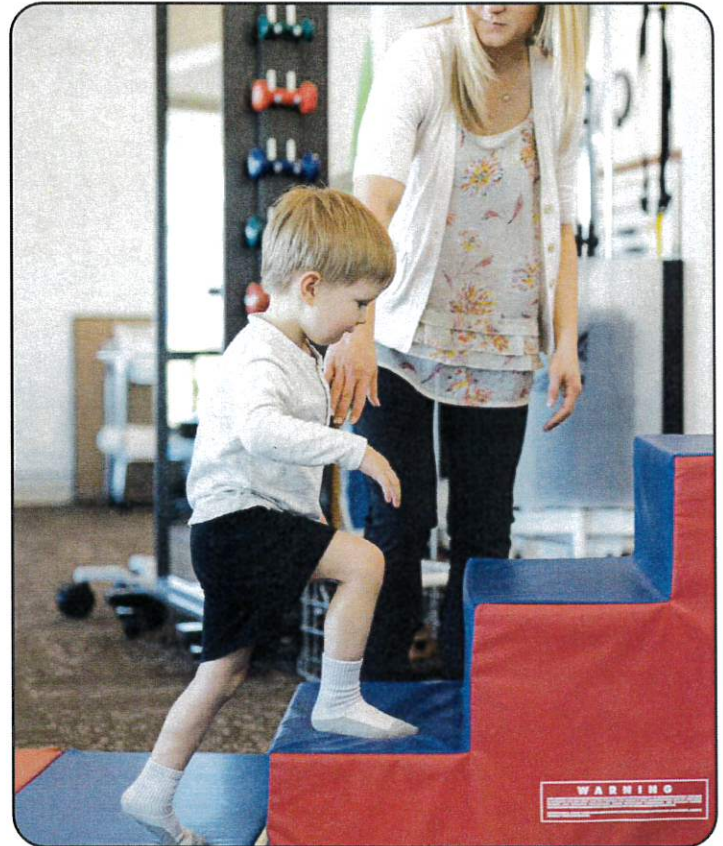
- Developmental disabilities which affect gross motor (large muscle movement) or coordination skills

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Where Do PTs Work?

Physical therapists work in a variety of settings, including hospitals, private clinics, early intervention programs, schools, nursing homes, sports and fitness facilities, hospice and palliative care, and in clients' homes. PTs work with the tiniest newborns in the NICU (neonatal intensive care unit) to adults nearing the end of life. PTs often work on interdisciplinary teams with other healthcare professionals including occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, physicians/orthopedic doctors, orthotists and prosthetists, assistive technology providers, early interventionists, and many others.



For helpful physical therapy materials, go to www.superduperinc.com and click on "OT & PT Resources".

Resources:

<https://www.apta.org/your-career/careers-in-physical-therapy/becoming-a-pt>

<https://www.xopt1.com/blog/diseases-treated-by-physical-therapy/>

<https://pediatricapta.org/consumer-patient-information/pdfs/09%20ABCs%20of%20Ped%20PT.pdf>

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