

Physical Therapists

Professional Activities

Physical therapists, sometimes referred to as simply PTs, are healthcare professionals who diagnose and treat individuals of all ages, from newborns to the very oldest, who have medical problems or other health-related conditions, illnesses, or injuries that limits their abilities to move and perform functional activities as well as they would like in their daily lives. Physical therapists examine each individual and develop a plan using treatment techniques to promote the ability to move, reduce pain, restore function, and prevent disability. In addition, PTs work with individuals to prevent the loss of mobility before it occurs by developing fitness and wellness-oriented programs for healthier and more active lifestyles.

Physical therapists provide care to people of all ages who have functional problems resulting from, for example, back and neck injuries, sprains/strains and fractures, arthritis, burns, amputations, stroke, multiple sclerosis, conditions such as cerebral palsy and spina bifida, and injuries related to work and sports. Physical therapy care and services are provided by physical therapists and physical therapist assistants who work under the direction and supervision of a physical therapist. Physical therapists evaluate and diagnose movement dysfunction and use interventions to treat patient/clients. Interventions may include therapeutic exercise, functional training, manual therapy techniques, assistive and adaptive devices and equipment, and physical agents and electrotherapeutic modalities.

Physical therapists often consult and practice with a variety of other professionals, such as physicians, dentists, nurses, educators, social workers, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, and audiologists.

Physical therapists practice in hospitals, outpatient clinics, and private offices that have specially equipped facilities. These jobs can be physically demanding, because therapists may have to stoop, kneel, crouch, lift, and stand for long periods. In addition, physical therapists move heavy equipment and lift patients or help them turn, stand, or walk.

Educational Requirements

Today's entrants to this profession need a post-baccalaureate degree from an accredited physical therapy program. All States regulate the practice of physical therapy, which usually requires passing scores on national and State examinations.

The American Physical Therapy Association's accrediting body, called the Commission on Accreditation of Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE), accredits entry-level academic programs in physical therapy. Currently, only graduate degree physical therapist programs are accredited. Master's degree programs typically are 2 to 2.5 years in length, while doctoral degree programs last 3 years.

Physical therapist education programs include foundational science courses, such as biology, anatomy, physiology, cellular histology, exercise physiology, neuroscience, biomechanics, pharmacology, pathology, and radiology/imaging, as well as behavioral science courses, such as evidence-based practice and clinical reasoning. Some of the clinically-based courses include medical screening, examination tests and measures,

diagnostic process, therapeutic interventions, outcomes assessment, and practice management. In addition to classroom and laboratory instruction, students receive supervised clinical experience.

Among the undergraduate courses that are useful when one applies to a physical therapist education program are anatomy, biology, chemistry, physics, social science, mathematics, and statistics. Before granting admission, many programs require volunteer experience in the physical therapy department of a hospital or clinic.

All States regulate the practice of physical therapy. Eligibility requirements vary by State. Typical requirements for physical therapists include graduation from an accredited physical therapy education program; passing the National Physical Therapy Examination; and fulfilling State requirements such as jurisprudence exams. A number of States require continuing education as a condition of maintaining licensure.

Physical therapists should have strong interpersonal and communication skills, so they can educate patients about their condition and physical therapy treatments and communicate with patients' families. Physical therapists also should be compassionate and possess a desire to help patients.

Physical therapists are expected to continue their professional development by participating in continuing education courses and workshops. Some physical therapists become board certified in a clinical specialty. Opportunities for physical therapists exist in academia and research. Some become self-employed, providing contract services or opening a private practice.

Academic Programs

[Bradley University](#)

[Midwestern University](#)

[Monmouth College](#)

[Northern Illinois University](#)

[Northwestern University](#)

[Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science](#)

[University of Illinois at Chicago](#)

Employment/Salary Outlook

The number of physical therapist jobs is probably greater than the number of practicing physical therapists, because some physical therapists work part time, holding two or more jobs. For example, some may work in a private practice, but also work part time in another healthcare facility.

About 60 percent of physical therapists worked in hospitals or in offices of other health practitioners. Other jobs were in the home healthcare services industry, nursing care facilities, outpatient care centers, and offices of physicians. Some physical therapists were self-employed in private practices, seeing individual patients and contracting to provide services in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, nursing care facilities, home healthcare agencies, adult day care programs, and schools. Physical therapists also teach in academic institutions and conduct research.

Employment is expected to grow much faster than average. Job opportunities should be good. Employment of physical therapists is expected to grow by 34 percent from 2014 to 2024, much faster than the average for all occupations. Changes to restrictions on reimbursement for physical therapy services by third-party payers will increase patient access to services and, thus, increase demand. The increasing elderly population will drive growth in the demand for physical therapy services. The elderly population is particularly vulnerable to chronic

and debilitating conditions that require therapeutic services. Also, the baby-boom generation is entering the prime age for heart attacks and strokes, increasing the demand for cardiac and physical rehabilitation. Medical and technological developments will permit a greater percentage of trauma victims and newborns with birth defects to survive, creating additional demand for rehabilitative care. In addition, growth may result from advances in medical technology and the use of evidence-base practices, which could permit the treatment of an increasing number of disabling conditions that were untreatable in the past.

In addition, the federally mandated Individuals with Disabilities Education Act guarantees that students have access to services from physical therapists and other therapeutic and rehabilitative services. Demand for physical therapists will continue in schools.

Job opportunities will be good for licensed physical therapists in all settings. Job opportunities should be particularly good in acute hospital, skilled nursing, and orthopedic settings, where the elderly are most often treated. Job prospects should be especially favorable in rural areas as many physical therapists tend to cluster in highly populated urban and suburban areas.

State and National Wages

Location	Pay Period	2021		
		Low	Median	High
United States	Hourly	\$29.77	\$45.97	\$61.11
	Annual	\$61,930	\$95,620	\$127,110
Illinois	Hourly	\$31.44	\$46.97	\$58.83
	Annual	\$65,380	\$97,690	\$122,370

State and National Trends

United States	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2021	2031		
Physical Therapists	238,200	279,200	17%	15,400
Illinois	Employment		Percent Change	Job Openings ¹
	2020	2030		
Physical Therapists	9,450	10,390	10%	500

¹Job Openings refers to the average annual job openings due to growth and net replacement

Professional Organizations

American Physical Therapy Association (apta.org)

References

Occupational Outlook Handbook, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics
(<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/physical-therapists.htm>)

O*NET OnLine (<http://online.onetcenter.org/link/summary/29-1123.00>)

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