

Physical Therapy

Overview

Physical therapy is a nonsurgical approach to maintaining, restoring, and improving overall physical health. Pain-free mobility is crucial to your physical independence, earning a living, and quality of life. A physical therapist can help people regain strength and recover from an injury, disease, or surgery. PT may even help you avoid surgery altogether.

What is physical therapy?

Physical therapists (PTs) evaluate your movement, body type, and the interaction of all parts of the body. They offer cost-effective treatment to improve mobility, relieve pain, and reduce the need for surgery and opioid drugs. PT allows patients to participate in a recovery plan designed for their specific needs. Research has shown that inactivity weakens muscles that support the spine. Inactivity also can prolong recovery or even worsen some conditions.

PTs work in a variety of settings and with a variety of healthcare providers. Some PTs specialize in spine or in neurologic rehabilitation such as stroke, concussion, and Parkinson's.

How can physical therapy help me?

Physical therapy can help you regain function, relieve pain, and improve mobility. It can also help decrease your use of pain medicines and potentially help you avoid surgery. Receiving physical therapy is rarely a passive activity. Taking part in your own recovery can be empowering. Treatments may include:

- **Exercises to stretch and strengthen muscles:** Exercises are performed in a controlled manner to target weak muscles and restore them to proper function. Active therapeutic exercises deliver nutrients into the discs, muscles, ligaments, and joints. Exercise reduces the severity and duration of possible future episodes of back and neck pain.
- **Manual therapies:** Massage, stretching, joint mobilization, and traction are aimed at relaxing tense muscles and restricted joints in order to lessen back pain, reduce swelling, and increase

flexibility. Therapists use their hands to apply pressure and manipulate tissues in an attempt to loosen tight muscles, break up scar tissue, decrease muscle spasm, and improve joint function.

- **Therapeutic ultrasound:** Energy waves reach deep muscles and ligaments to increase blood flow to the injured area. This helps to speed up the healing process and to decrease pain by reducing swelling and edema. Ultrasound is applied using an applicator, called a transducer, which is placed on the patient's skin.
- **Electrical stimulation:** During this therapy, electrical impulses are applied to nerves and muscles via adhesive pads that are placed on the skin. It is used to reduce pain and swelling as well as to facilitate muscle contractions. Therapists can adjust the settings to allow for a strong or gentle intensity.
- **Cervical traction:** With the patient lying comfortably on their back, a machine gently pulls the neck. This opens the spaces between the spinal bones and temporarily reduces pressure on the discs and nerves.
- **Lumbar traction:** With the patient lying on their back or stomach, a machine gently pulls on the low back region. This opens the spaces between the spinal bones and temporarily reduces pressure on the discs and nerves.
- **Dynamic stabilization:** This form of exercise improves the neuromuscular core stability of the spine by activating the abdominal, spinal, and gluteal muscles. By matching these muscles to various movements, an injury-specific program is developed for the patient.
- **Dry needling:** Very fine needles are placed through the skin and into the deeper tissues that are trigger points to pain. Dry needling causes a micro lesion within the damaged tissue and is relatively painless. It normalizes the physiology of the area by reducing tissue tension and improving blood flow. It is called "dry" needling because no medicine is injected.

- **Braces / orthotics:** The PT will evaluate your need for special equipment, such as braces or crutches/walker. If you are at risk for falling, the PT may recommend simple equipment to help make your home a safer place for you.
- **Education:** Improvements in posture and body mechanics at work can help prevent re-injury. Proper lifting techniques will be taught.

About your office visit

After reviewing your medical history, the physical therapist will evaluate your strength, range of motion, balance, coordination, posture, and body mechanics. They will ask you questions about your home or work environment and your specific goals. The PT will develop a treatment plan unique to your condition.

A physical therapist assistant may help with the delivery of this personalized program. The goal is to improve your function during daily activities. Your progress is carefully tracked and reported to the referring physician.

What training do physical therapists have?

Physical therapists (PTs) have earned a bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degree in physical therapy. National and state board exams are required for licensing and certification.

Physical therapist assistants (PTAs) have an associate degree from an accredited PTA program. PTAs must pass the national exam for licensing and certification. PTAs work under the direction of a physical therapist.

Finding a physical therapist

Consult with your doctor to choose a PT who best meets your treatment needs.

Sources & links

If you have questions, please contact Semmes Murphey at 901-522-7700.

Links

- www.moveforwardpt.com
- www.neuropt.org



updated > 4.2019
 reviewed by > Lisa Cleveland, PT, Mayfield Clinic, Cincinnati, Ohio

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