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Physical Therapy Brings Motion to Life

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Physical therapists (PTs) are highly educated, licensed health care professionals who help patients reduce pain and improve or restore mobility, in many cases helping patients avoid the need for surgery and long-term use of prescription medications and their side effects.

What PTs Do

Physical therapists diagnose and treat individuals of all ages including newborns, children, and the elderly. Physical therapists examine each individual and develop a plan of care using treatment techniques to promote the ability to move, reduce pain, restore function, and prevent disability. In addition, they 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. PTs may also consult and practice with other health professionals to improve overall function.

Conditions PTs Treat

PTs manage a wide variety of conditions that occur across the lifespan. These include, among many others, arthritis, back pain, balance difficulties, burns, chronic pain, developmental delays, hand injuries, incontinence, fractures, lymphedema, osteoporosis, sports injuries, pelvic pain, repetitive stress injuries, stroke, and traumatic brain injury.

PT Practice Settings

Physical therapists practice in a wide variety of settings, including outpatient clinics or offices; inpatient rehabilitation facilities; skilled nursing, extended care, or acute care hospitals; homes; academic institutions or research centers; schools; hospices; industrial, workplace, or other occupational environments; and fitness centers and sports training facilities.

Educational Requirements

A physical therapist in the US must earn a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree from an accredited PT education program. Most DPT programs require applicants to complete a bachelor's degree before they can enroll. A master's degree in physical therapy is no longer offered to any new students in the US.

Admissions

Approximately 95 percent of PT education programs participate in the Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service (PTCAS). PTCAS allows applicants to use 1 application and set of materials to apply to multiple PT education programs. Applicants to a non-PTCAS institution must apply directly using the program's local application.

Licensure

After graduation, candidates must pass a state-administered national exam. Other requirements for physical therapist practice vary from state to state according to physical therapy practice acts and state regulations governing physical therapy.

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Salary

More than 200,000 physical therapists are licensed in the US today. The median salary for a physical therapist is \$85,000 depending on position, years of experience, degree of education, geographic location, and practice setting. (Source: APTA 2016-17 Physical Therapists Medium Income Report.)

Employment Outlook

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of physical therapists is expected to grow by 39 percent from 2010 to 2020, much faster than the average for all occupations.

The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA)

APTA is the principal membership organization representing and promoting the physical therapy profession. It represents more than 100,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students of physical therapy nationwide. APTA's mission is building a community that advances the profession of physical therapy to improve the health of society. APTA provides opportunities for physical therapists to achieve advanced education and skills in specific physical therapy specialty areas.

Residency

Physical therapists can choose to pursue a residency after graduation and licensure. Residencies advance a PT's expertise in a defined area of clinical practice and provide structured opportunities for PTs to learn from mentors who are experts in a chosen field of practice.

Specialist Certification

Physical therapists can become certified as clinical specialists through the American Board of Physical Therapy (ABPTS). Specialization is voluntary. PTs with 2,000+ hours of clinical experience in a specialty area are eligible to sit for the certification exam. The 8 physical therapist specialty areas are: cardiovascular and pulmonary, clinical electrophysiology, geriatric, neurologic, orthopedic, pediatric, sports, and women's health.

Fellowship

The fellowship program provides more in-depth content in a specialty or subspecialty area for experienced physical therapists who have (1) a specialist certification, (2) completed a residency in a specialty area, or (3) demonstrable clinical skills within a particular specialty area.

For Further Information

Visit the following APTA webpages to learn more about PT education and careers.

- apta.org/ProspectiveStudents
- ChoosePT.com
- ptcas.org



Physical therapist assistants (PTAs) provide physical therapy services under the direction and supervision of a licensed physical therapist. PTAs assist the physical therapist in the treatment of individuals of all ages, from newborns to the very oldest, who have medical problems or other health-related conditions that limit their abilities to move and perform functional activities in their daily lives.

What PTAs Do

Care provided by a PTA may include teaching patients exercise for mobility, strength and coordination, training for activities such as walking with crutches, canes, or walkers, massage, and the use of physical agents and electrotherapy such as ultrasound and electrical stimulation. An important component of patient interventions involves teaching the patient appropriate ways to move or perform particular tasks to prevent further injury and to promote health and wellness.

PTA Work Settings

PTAs work in a variety of settings including hospitals, private practices, outpatient clinics, home health, nursing homes, schools, sports facilities, and more. PTAs may also measure changes in the patient's performance as a result of the physical therapy provided.

Educational Requirements

Physical therapist assistant (PTA) education, obtained in a CAPTE-accredited two-year associate degree program, prepares graduates for taking the national licensure examination and entering the field of physical therapy with the required knowledge, skills, and behaviors of a PTA. Licensure or certification is required in most states to work as a PTA.

Admissions

The admission requirements for physical therapist assistant (PTA) education programs vary greatly and may include prerequisite courses or volunteer experiences. Check with the programs of interest to learn about their admission requirements and to obtain an application

Licensure

After graduation from an accredited physical therapy education program candidates must pass a state-administered national exam to obtain licensure or certification required in all states except Hawaii. Other requirements, like special exams about the law or ethics, 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) Web site for more information about PTA licensure requirements.

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Salary

More than 90,000 physical therapist assistants are licensed in the U.S. today. The median salary for a physical therapist assistant is \$52,000 depending on position, years of experience, degree of education, geographic location, and practice setting. (Source: APTA 2016-17 Physical Therapist Assistants Medium Income Report.)

Employment Outlook

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment of physical therapist assistants is expected to increase 46 percent from 2010 to 2020, much faster than the average for all occupations.

The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA)

APTA is the principal membership organization representing and promoting the physical therapy profession. It represents more than 100,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students of physical therapy nationwide. APTA's mission is to further the profession's role in the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of movement dysfunctions and the enhancement of the physical health and functional abilities of members of the public. APTA provides opportunities for physical therapist assistants to achieve recognition for advanced education and skills in specific areas of physical therapy, like pediatrics, geriatrics, etc.

PTA Advanced Proficiency Pathways (APP)

The Physical Therapist Assistant Advanced Proficiency Pathways (PTA APPs) are educational guides to help the licensed PTA gain advanced proficiency knowledge and skill in a selected area of work. Using the PTA APPs, participants complete online core courses common to all of the APPs; content specific courses for the selected area of work; and mentoring experiences with a qualified clinical mentor of the participant's choosing.

For Further Information

Visit the following APTA webpages to learn more about PTA education and careers.

- apta.org/ProspectiveStudents
- ChoosePT.com
- fsbpt.org