American Physical Therapy Association Debunks 7 Common Physical Therapy Myths

ALEXANDRIA, VA, October 6, 2014 – A recent survey conducted by the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) confirmed 7 of the most common myths about physical therapy. While the demand for physical therapists continues to rise and many consumers are experiencing the transformative effects of physical therapy, some misconceptions persist. APTA is debunking common ones during National Physical Therapy Month in October to better enable consumers to take charge of their health and improve their overall fitness, mobility, and quality of life. Below are 7 of the most common myths about physical therapy, followed by corresponding facts.

1) Myth: I need a physician's referral to see a physical therapist.
   Fact: The survey revealed 70% of people think a referral or prescription is required for evaluation by a physical therapist. However, all 50 states and the District of Columbia (DC) allow patients to be evaluated by a physical therapist without a physician’s prior referral. In addition, 48 states and DC allow for some form of treatment or intervention without a physician referral or prescription (Oklahoma and Michigan being the exception.) Beginning November 1, 2014, patients in Oklahoma will be able to seek treatment from a physical therapist without a physician referral. On January 1, 2015, patients in Michigan will be able to do so, as well.

2) Myth: Physical therapy is painful.
   Fact: Physical therapists seek to minimize pain and discomfort—even if it is chronic or long-term. They work within your pain threshold to help you heal, and restore movement and function. The survey found that 71% of people who have never visited a physical therapist think physical therapy is painful. That percentage significantly decreased, however, among patients who had visited a physical therapist within the past year.

3) Myth: Physical therapy is only for injuries and accidents.
   Fact: Physical therapists do a lot more than just stretch or strengthen weak muscles after an injury or surgery. As experts in the way the body moves, they are skilled at evaluating and diagnosing potential problems before they lead to more serious injuries or disabling conditions. Physical therapists help people of all ages and abilities reduce pain, improve or restore mobility, and stay active and fit throughout life.

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4) **Myth: Any health care professional can perform physical therapy.**  
**Fact:** Although the survey found that 42% of consumers are aware that physical therapy can be performed only by a licensed physical therapist, 37% still believe that other health care professionals can provide physical therapy. While physical therapists and other health care professionals may perform some treatments that seem similar, physical therapy can be provided only by licensed physical therapists.

5) **Myth: Physical therapy isn't covered by insurance.**  
**Fact:** Most insurance policies cover some form of physical therapy. Beyond insurance coverage, physical therapy has shown to reduce costs by helping people avoid unnecessary imaging scans, surgery, prescription drugs. Physical therapy can also lower costs by helping patients avoid falls or by addressing conditions before they become chronic.

6) **Myth: Surgery is my only option.**  
**Fact:** In many cases, physical therapy has been shown to be as effective as surgery in treating a wide range of conditions—from rotator cuff tears and degenerative disk disease to meniscal tears and some forms of knee osteoarthritis. The study found that people who recently have seen a physical therapist know this to be true, with 79% believing that physical therapy can be a viable alternative to surgery.

7) **Myth: I can do physical therapy myself.**  
**Fact:** The goal of physical therapy is to educate the patient on successful self-care. To accomplish this, however, the expert care and guidance of a licensed physical therapist is required. Your physical therapist’s specialized education and clinical expertise, combined with the latest available evidence and treatment techniques, are critical to evaluating and diagnosing your condition and developing an individualized plan of care.

“Commonly held misconceptions about physical therapy can become barriers to people seeking the potentially life-changing care of a physical therapist,” said APTA member Joseph Brence, PT, DPT, FAAOMPT, COMT, DAC. “We hope that by challenging these myths with facts, consumers will recognize that physical therapists can help them optimize their movement and greatly improve their quality of life.”

APTA represents more than 88,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students of physical therapy nationwide. Learn more about conditions physical therapists can treat, and find a physical therapist in your area, at www.MoveForwardPT.com. Consumers are encouraged to follow us on Twitter (@MoveForwardPT) and Facebook.

**Methodology**  
The sample for this study was randomly drawn from a national list of adults 18 and older. The gender split was 50/50. Five-hundred online interviews were conducted in September 2014, and stat testing was done at a 95% confidence level.

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