



APTA Practice Advisory: Primary Care Physical Therapy

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The issue: As demand for accessible health care services continues to rise, particularly in rural and underserved areas, there is a growing shortage of primary care providers. This shortage leads to delays in patient access to necessary care, especially for individuals with musculoskeletal conditions, chronic pain, and mobility issues. This practice advisory provides guidance on the emerging care delivery model and area of practice known as primary care physical therapy and highlights the role of physical therapists as integral members of a patient's primary care team. It defines the role, scope, and competencies of physical therapists and physical therapist assistants within primary care teams and addresses practice readiness, education, and billing considerations.

Defining Primary Care: According to the [National Academy of Medicine](#), primary care is defined as "the provision of integrated, accessible health care services by clinicians accountable for addressing the majority of personal health care needs, developing sustained partnerships with patients, and practicing in the context of family and community."

Defining Primary Care Physical Therapy:

The [APTA Primary Care Special Interest Group](#) defines primary care in physical therapy as a professional practice area in which physical therapists provide first contact and ongoing, broad spectrum preventive and reactive health management services as an integral member of the primary health care team. Physical therapists' primary area of expertise is to address pain, disability, function, health, and wellness in order to optimize participation in life activities. The care is person-centered, team-based, and community-aligned, with the goal of achieving improved health with higher quality care at lower costs.

About APTA Practice Advisories

APTA issues practice advisories to assist the physical therapy community in providing quality care that follows best available evidence and practice management principles. Practice advisories are not formal association guidelines, policies, positions, procedures, or standards. They are not clinical practice guidelines and do not establish a standard of care.

Physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and students of physical therapy are responsible for clinical practice that is consistent with their scope of practice, and for complying with licensure laws and other regulations, all of which vary by state. The information provided is not meant as a substitute for legal or professional advice on any subject matter.

Practice advisories may be updated after their original publication. Use of practice advisories is voluntary.

How Is Primary Care Physical Therapy Different From Direct Access to Physical Therapy?

While primary care physical therapy may allow for direct access to physical therapist services, these concepts differ. Direct access refers to a patient's ability to see a PT without a physician referral, and this is governed by state law. Primary care physical therapy involves PTs and PTAs serving a variety of roles while practicing in collaboration with or embedded within primary care teams to provide comprehensive, person-centered care across settings.

The Impact of Primary Care Physical Therapy

[Primary care physical therapy expands timely access to care](#), enabling patients with prevalent musculoskeletal conditions, chronic pain, and mobility issues to have their conditions addressed without delay — improving outcomes and reducing costs through early intervention. For the health care system, it helps meet rising demand by increasing provider availability, optimizing resources, and advancing system goals such as prevention and value-based care. This approach not only fills critical health care gaps but also ensures timely, targeted, and efficient patient management.

The growing shortage of primary care providers is felt most acutely in rural and underserved areas, where access to timely care is limited. Primary care physical therapists can help address this gap by serving as musculoskeletal experts within primary care teams, offering focused, efficient diagnosis, treatment, and referral for patients with movement-related conditions. [A recent study](#) found that 96% of primary care physicians agree that collaborating with physical therapists benefits both them and their patients.

Scope of Practice and Core Competencies for Clinicians in Primary Care Settings

While practicing in primary care settings, [PTs consistently demonstrate broad clinical competence across body systems and the lifespan](#), including:

- Whole health and biopsychosocial reasoning.
- Diagnostic study referral appropriateness and care coordination.
- Complex care management and prioritization.
- Health promotion and disease prevention (e.g., sleep, diet, physical activity).
- Advanced clinical reasoning and triage management.
- Health systems literacy and multidisciplinary team communication.
- Pharmacologic impact on systems and physical function.
- Population health and community engagement.

APTA Board Certification in Primary Care Physical Therapy

Primary Care Physical Therapy is now an ABPTS board-certified specialty, providing a key pathway for physical therapists to advance skills essential to providing primary care services. This milestone reflects the unique competencies required for PTs to function as specialists within the primary care model. Board specialization is a process by which physical therapists demonstrate a greater depth of knowledge and skills related to a specific area of practice. The specialty certification is anticipated to begin accepting applications in spring 2027, with the initial examination expected to be administered in the spring of 2028.

While board certification is an avenue for advancing skills relevant to primary care physical therapy, it is not mandatory for PTs practicing in primary care settings. Entry-level PTs and those with relevant experience can function in these roles as long as they:

- Work within their personal, professional, and jurisdictional scope of practice.
- Seek post-professional education or mentorship as needed.
- Maintain strong collaboration with other primary care team members.

Role of PTAs in Primary Care Physical Therapy

PTAs, under the direction of a PT, play a key role in implementing care plans by reinforcing patient education on wellness, preventative care, and targeted exercise and activities. PTAs can also deliver interventions that support primary care physical therapy goals. PTAs, however, cannot serve as first-contact providers or independently make triage, diagnostic testing or referral decisions.

Where do Primary Care Physical Therapists Practice?

Primary care PTs may practice in a variety of settings including physical therapy clinics, primary care clinics, community health centers, VA clinics, wellness centers, military installations, hospitals, schools, work sites, sports teams/sporting facilities, homes, austere/wilderness environments.

Reimbursement and Policy Considerations

Primary care physical therapy can be supported through various payment models, including traditional fee-for-service, cash-based practice, shared savings, bundled payment, episodic payment, and capitated payment. The movement toward value-based models, as well as the expansion of accountable care organizations and integrated health systems, are becoming important avenues as health systems shift toward outcomes-driven payment.

Advocacy efforts remain critical to expand the role of physical therapists as primary care providers, increase licensure compact access, and support their ability to order diagnostic

imaging, labs, and durable medical equipment. Achieving reimbursement equity for team-based care and ensuring PTs can refer to specialists and recommend physical limitations are also key policy priorities.

Know Your Scope of Practice Related to Primary Care Physical Therapy

Before practicing in a primary care physical therapy setting, clinicians are expected to evaluate their scope of practice to ensure safe, ethical, and legally compliant care. This includes personal readiness (knowledge, skills, and experience), professional standards, jurisdictional limits (state laws and direct access regulations), and institutional policies. While primary care physical therapy fits within the profession's scope, individual readiness and state regulations determine a therapist's ability to function effectively as a first-contact provider or team-based care member.

APTA Resources

Explore these APTA resources to learn more:

- [APTA Federal Primary Care Special Interest Group](#)
- [APTA Federal Primary Care Special Interest Group Resource: Primary Care Physical Therapy Defined](#)
- [APTA Federal Primary Care Special Interest Group Resource: Primary Care Physical Therapy: 2025 Consensus Definition](#)
- [APTA Federal: Primary Care Physical Therapy Implementation Strategies and Outcomes](#)
- [APTA Primary Care Certificate](#)
- [APTA Alternative Payment Models Community](#)
- [APTA Health and Wellness Promotion Network](#)

Members can reach out to practice@apta.org with questions.

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