

Primary Care Physician Perceptions of Physical Therapy

A Report From the American Physical Therapy Association



November 2024

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Background



On three separate occasions over the past 17 years — in 2007, 2016, and 2021 — the American Physical Therapy Association has commissioned research to better understand consumers’ perceptions of physical therapists and physical therapist services. These surveys and studies have informed APTA’s messaging to its target audiences, which include consumers, APTA members, policymakers, and others, and the results have helped the association adapt its public relations strategies to address evolving challenges and opportunities.

In reviewing the report on the 2021 consumer survey, the APTA Board of Directors identified a priority: that members “embrace the synergetic relationship between primary care physicians and patients and change the conversation about referrals to physical therapy.” Noting that PCPs largely control patient access to physical therapy, the report had suggested that PTs “partner with physicians” to encourage more referrals.

In early 2024, APTA conducted research to determine PCPs’ perceptions regarding physical therapy and to identify the barriers to optimizing the PT-PCP relationship. The report that follows summarizes the key findings from this research and is meant to help APTA and its members:

- Better understand referral patterns to physical therapy from PCPs.
- Identify ways to partner with physicians to encourage more referrals.
- Develop consumer and PCP messaging regarding physical therapy’s place in the “patient-PCP conversation.”

Research Method

Over a one-week period in late January 2024, 301 primary care physicians completed an online survey administered by Penta Group, LLC, on behalf of APTA. To participate in the survey participants had to meet the following qualifications:

- Be a currently practicing PCP, specializing in family or internal medicine.
- Be at least 25 years old and in practice for at least three years.
- Have previously referred patients to physical therapy or be open to doing so in the future.

Among the survey participants, 44% identified as female PCPs and 54% identified as male PCPs. The majority were practicing in metropolitan areas, and more than 4 out of 10 were in independent practices.

Demographic Profile of Primary Care Physicians

Segment	% of Sample
Gender	
Female	44%
Male	54%
Practice	
Large Metro Area	28%
Medium Metro Area	35%
Small Metro Area	17%
Rural Area	10%
Region	
Northeast	22%
Midwest	22%
South	33%
West	23%

Segment	% of Sample
Age	
< 45	39%
45-54	30%
55+	32%
Work Setting	
Independent Practice / Clinic	44%
Practice / Clinic in a Network or System	34%
Hospital in a Network or System	17%
Federal / Government-funded Hospital	1%
Urgent Care / Clinic	4%

Percentages calculated as N size out of total sample size (N = 301).

The survey results reflect a representative sample of PCPs and have a margin of error of plus or minus 6%.

Note: For this and other data points in the report, due to rounding and cases where “other” categories were not large enough to include, percentages may not always add up to 100%.

Overview of Findings



The survey found that PCPs overall have a very positive view of physical therapy and trust the care PTs provide. It also found that PCPs are eager to refer their patients to physical therapy and that most would like to improve care coordination with PTs through more frequent and enhanced communication.

PCPs on physical therapist services:

- They trust PTs and value the care they provide.
- They want to refer patients to physical therapy.

When addressing barriers standing in the way of partnerships between PCPs and PTs, survey participants indicated their concerns are mainly patient-centric.

PCPs on barriers to physical therapy:

- Patients lack awareness of physical therapy and the benefits it can provide.
- Patients believe physical therapy is too costly and time-consuming.
- Patients have limited access to local physical therapy services.

On the whole, the research makes clear that now is the time for APTA and its members to strengthen the relationship between PTs and PCPs. It's the right thing to do for the physical therapy profession, and it's also in the best interest of patients.

Conclusive Good News!

95%

PCPs view
the profession
very positively

92%

PCPs trust
the care
PTs provide

88%

PCPs would like to
refer more patients
to physical therapy

95%

PCPs believe
collaborating with PTs
would benefit patient care

Strengths



Three overarching themes emerged from the survey's many promising findings:

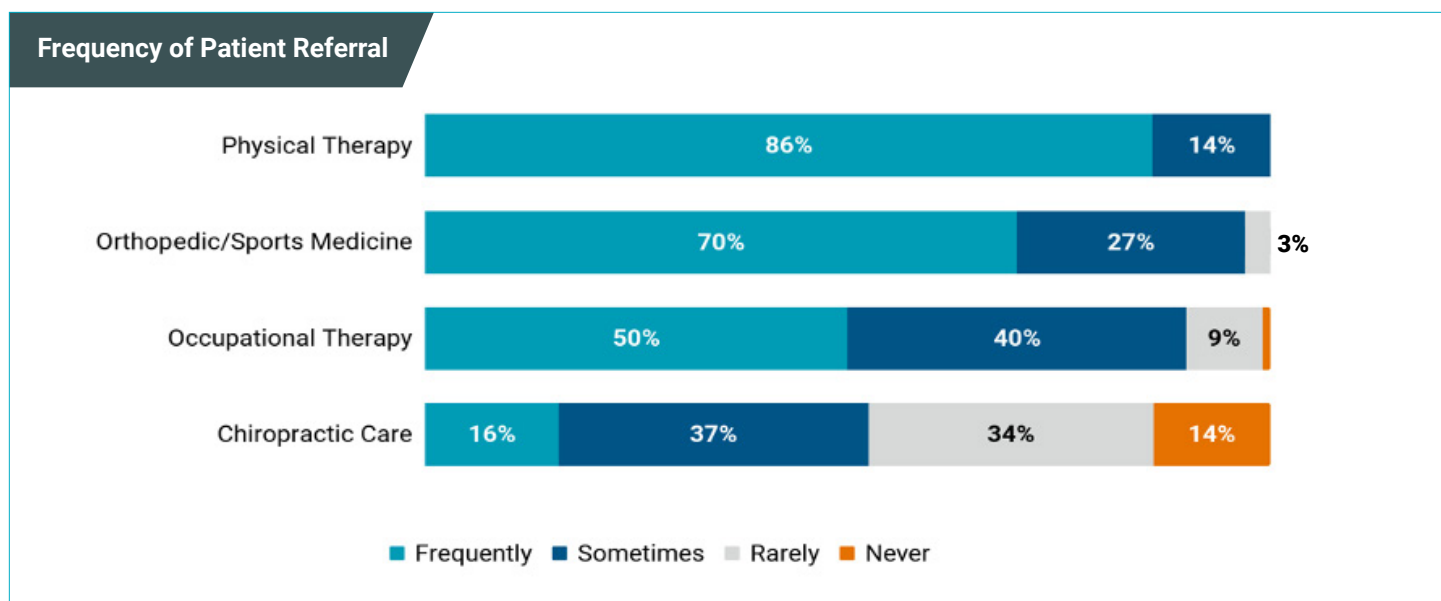
1. PCPs prefer to refer patients to physical therapy over similar care types.
2. PCPs have very positive perceptions of physical therapists and physical therapy.
3. PCPs are eager to collaborate more closely with physical therapists.

Key Theme 1: PCPs Prefer to Refer Patients to Physical Therapy Over Similar Care Types

The survey revealed that nearly 9 in 10 PCPs refer patients to physical therapy “frequently.” They also refer patients to physical therapy more often than they do to occupational therapy, chiropractic care, or orthopedic or sports medicine.

Survey question: How often do you typically refer your patients to each of the following?

- Physical therapy.
- Orthopedic/sports medicine.
- Occupational therapy.
- Chiropractic care.

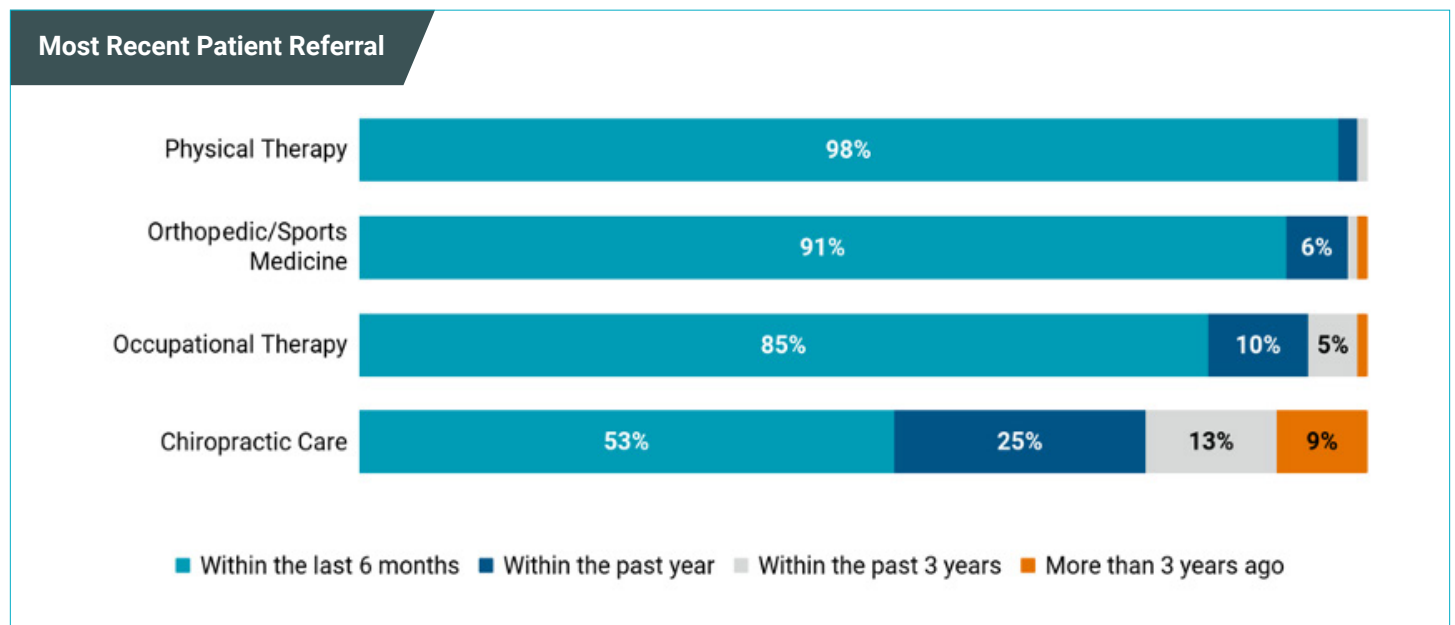


Strengths

When asked about their most recent patient referrals, physical therapy also came out on top. **Almost all PCPs (98%) said they had referred to physical therapy within the last six months.**

Survey question: When was the last time you referred a patient to each of the following?

- Physical therapy.
- Orthopedic/sports medicine.
- Occupational therapy.
- Chiropractic care



Strengths

Another positive referral-related finding was that **PCPs are likely to recommend physical therapy** for a variety of conditions. The likelihood of referring to physical therapy ranged widely, from 85% for low back pain to 7% for high blood pressure. This indicates an opportunity to educate PCPs about physical therapy for conditions less often referred. Physical therapy as the intervention of choice for many conditions is supported by the findings in [APTA's The Economic Value of Physical Therapy Report](#).

Survey question: For which of the following conditions would you be likely to refer a patient to physical therapy?

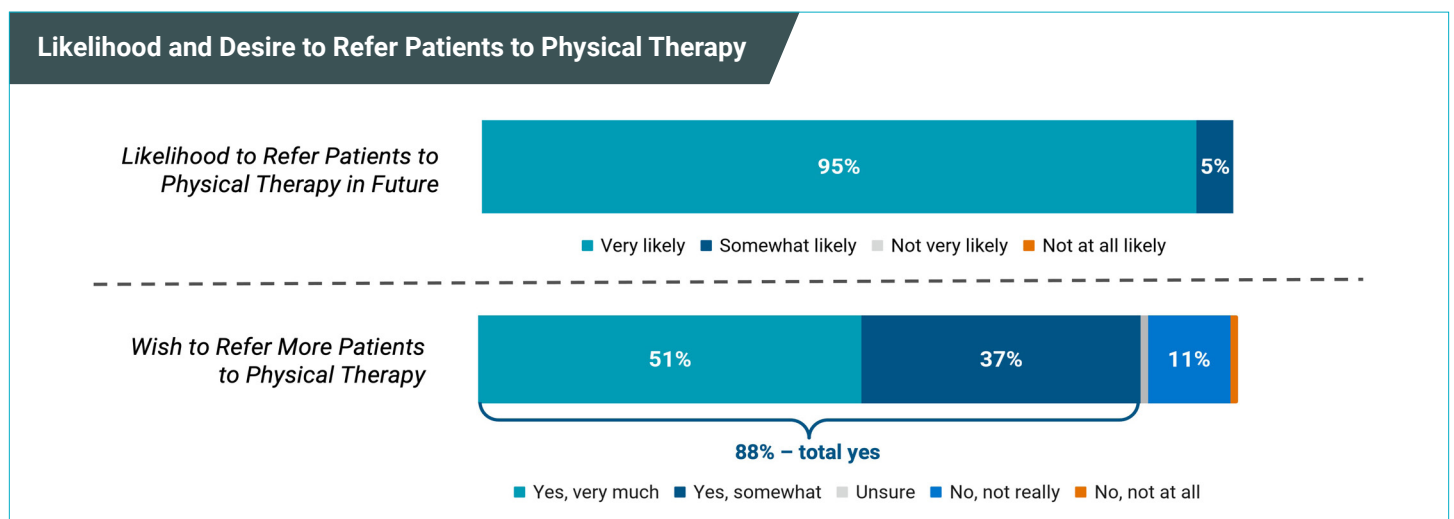
Conditions Referred to Physical Therapy More Often	% Likely to Refer
Low Back Pain	85%
Musculoskeletal Injury	83%
Sports Injuries	83%
Knee Osteoarthritis	79%
Falls	77%
Deconditioning	74%
Range of Motion Loss	74%
Weakness	68%
Pain	66%
Chronic Pain Management	64%

Conditions Referred to Physical Therapy Less Often	% Likely to Refer
General Arthritis	59%
Neurological Conditions	59%
Tennis Elbow	59%
Postural and Ergonomic Problems	57%
Pelvic Health (including men's and women's)	55%
Carpal Tunnel Syndrome	43%
Incontinence	39%
Cancer Rehabilitation	30%
Prevention and Wellness	27%
Claudication	16%
Weight Loss	14%
High Blood Pressure	7%

Conditions for which less than half of PCPs are likely to refer present opportunities for education and awareness.

Nearly all PCPs plan to refer to physical therapy in the future; most said they wish they could refer more patients.

Survey questions: How likely are you to refer your patients to a physical therapist in the future? Regardless of how often you refer your patients to physical therapy, do you wish you had the ability and access to refer more of your patients to physical therapy?



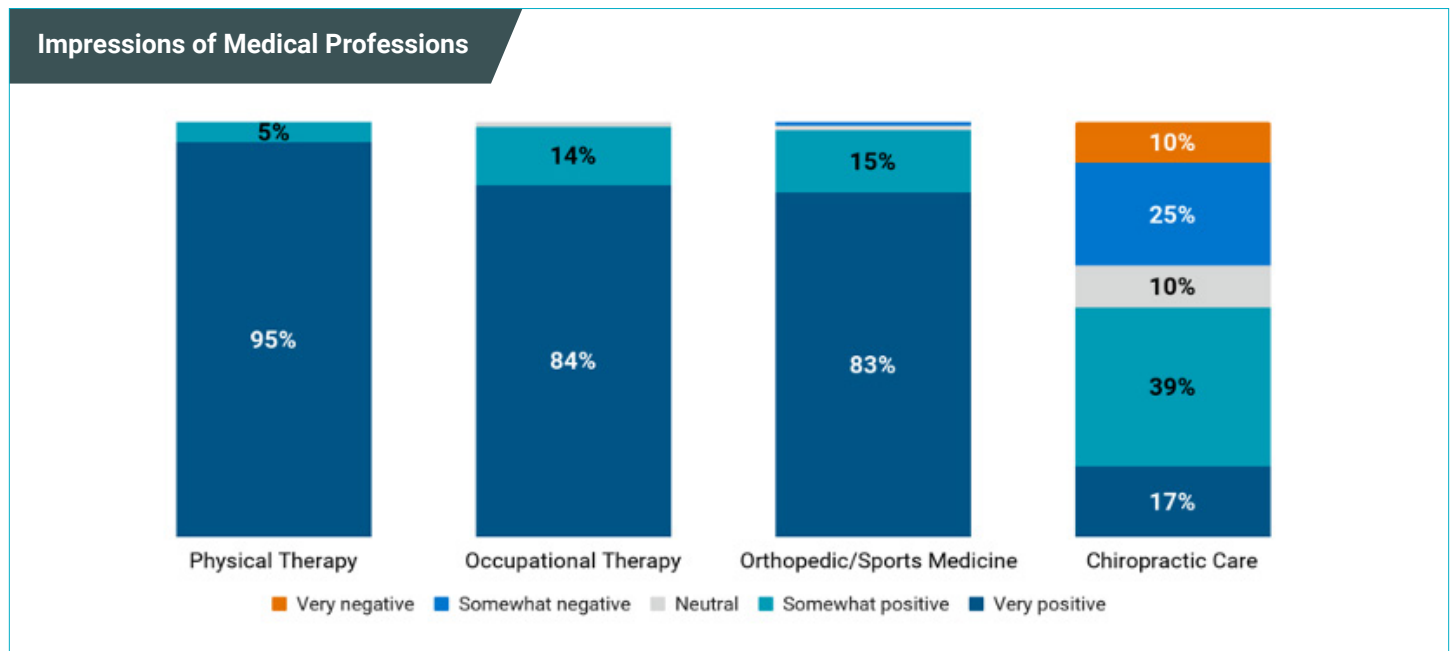
PCPs identified a lack of enough nearby clinics and appointment times as reasons why they don't refer patients and suspect some patients don't go to physical therapy as often as they would like.

Strengths

Key Theme 2: Primary Care Physicians Have Very Positive Perceptions of Physical Therapy

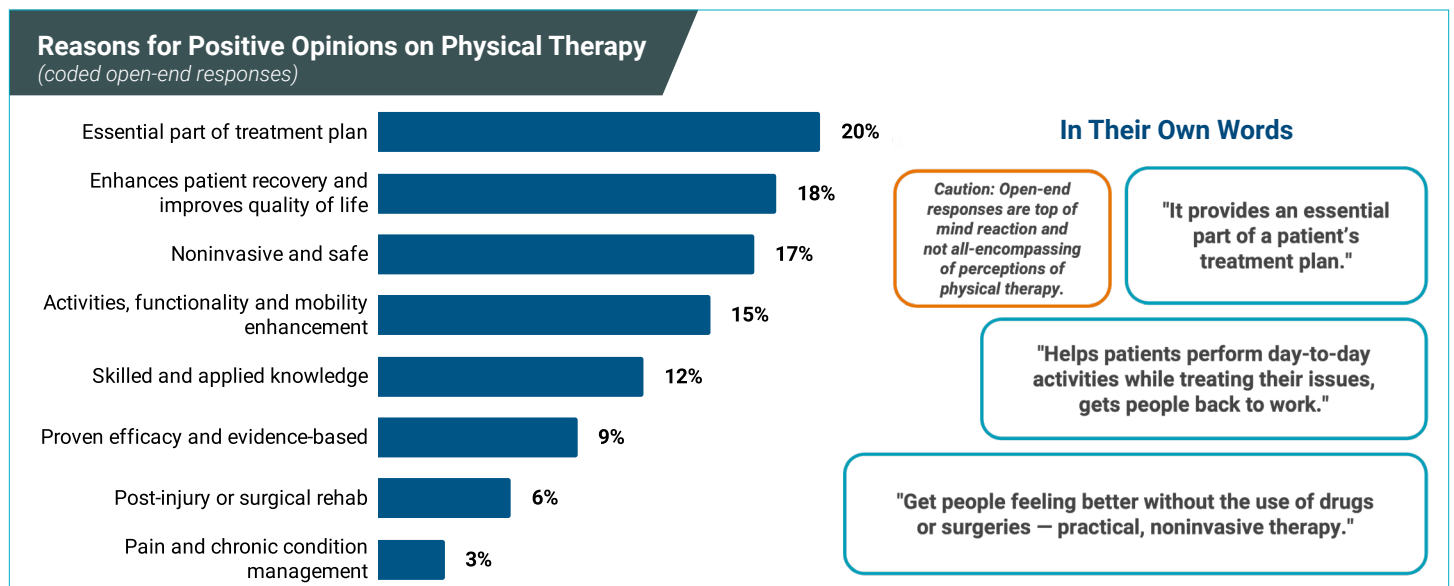
The survey found that physical therapy has a strong reputation among PCPs and that many physicians have a better impression of physical therapy than they do of similar health care professions.

Survey question: What is your overall impression of each of the following health care professions?



When asked for the reasons for their positive opinions about physical therapy, PCPs said it's an essential part of treatment for certain conditions that shortens recovery times and enhances patient quality of life.

Survey question: Why do you say that you have your opinion of physical therapy?



Strengths

The survey also revealed that **PCPs trust physical therapy** more than similar health care professions. Overall, 92% of respondents said they had complete or near complete trust their patients would get what they need in physical therapy.

Survey question: Assuming you were to refer patients to each of the following medical professions, how much trust would you have that your patients are getting what they need?

Trust in Medical Professions

	Physical Therapy	Orthopaedic/Sports Medicine	Occupational Therapy	Chiropractic Care
Total high trust (6 - 7)	92%	83%	82%	18%
7 - Complete trust	44%	42%	36%	5%
6	48%	41%	46%	13%
5	6%	13%	13%	19%
4	1%	3%	4%	20%
3	0%	0%	0%	15%
2	0%	0%	0%	17%
1 - No trust at all	0%	0%	0%	11%
Total low trust (1 - 3)	0%	0%	0%	43%

Finally, the survey found that **99% of PCPs thought their patients would be satisfied** with the services they received if they referred them to physical therapy. Roughly the same number had similar beliefs about patient satisfaction with orthopedic/sports medicine and occupational therapy, while significantly fewer felt this way about chiropractic care.

Survey question: Again assuming you were to refer patients to each of the following, how satisfied do you think your patients would be with the care they receive from each?

PCP Perception of Patient Satisfaction Among Health Care Professions

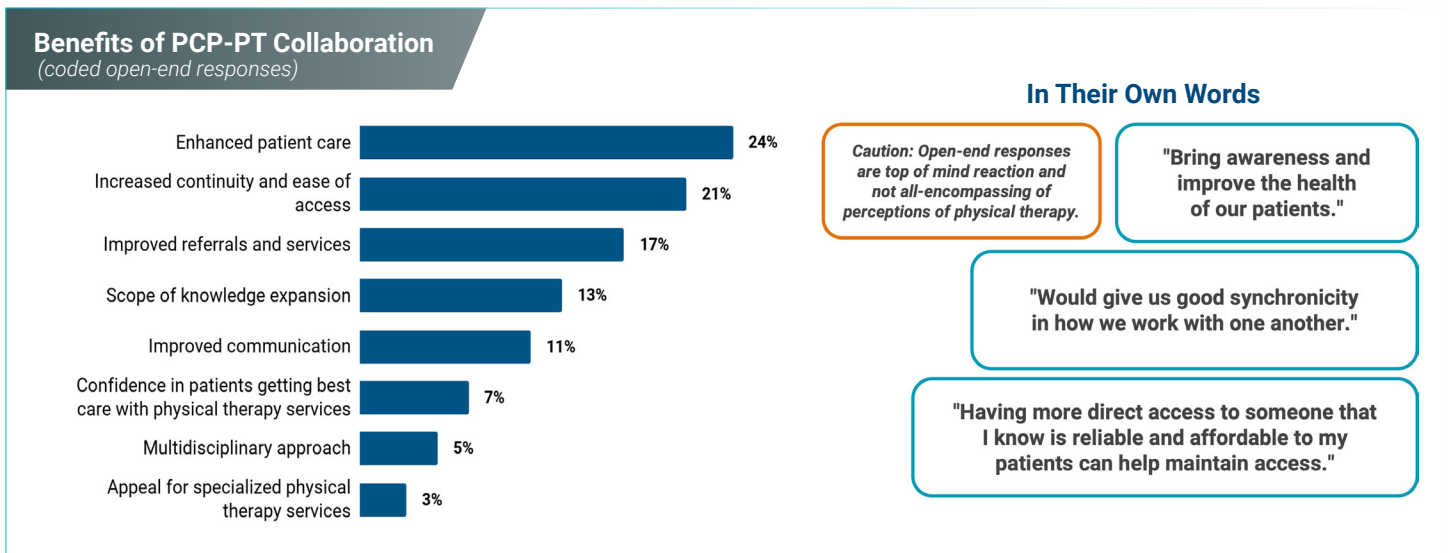
	Physical Therapy	Orthopaedic/Sports Medicine	Occupational Therapy	Chiropractic Care
Total satisfied	99%	97%	98%	70%
Extremely satisfied	69%	60%	55%	16%
Somewhat satisfied	30%	37%	43%	54%
Not very satisfied	1%	2%	0%	19%
Not at all satisfied	0%	0%	0%	4%
Don't know	1%	1%	2%	8%
Total unsatisfied	1%	2%	0%	23%

Strengths

Key Theme 3: PCPs Value Collaboration With PTs

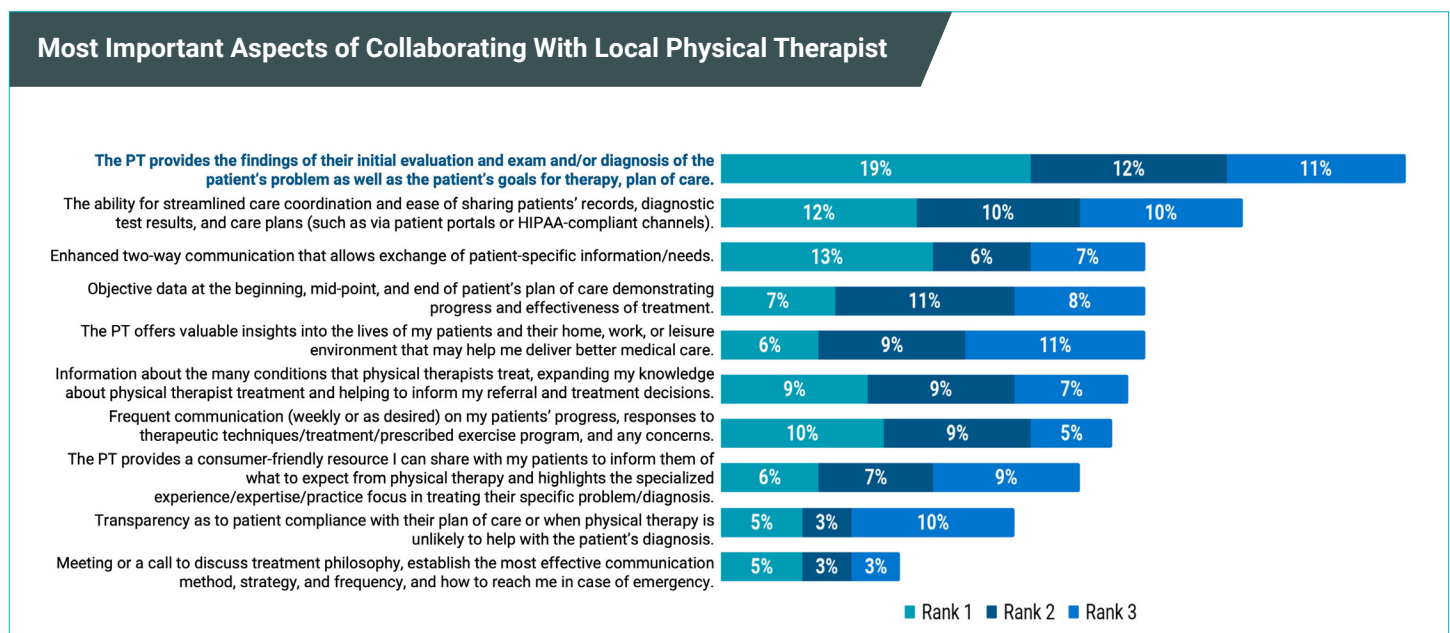
The survey revealed that **nearly all (96%) PCPs agree** that collaboration with physical therapists is beneficial to them and their patients, and many believe that such collaboration can improve patient care.

Survey question: Please describe in your own words how collaborating with a local physical therapist would benefit you, your practice, and/or your patients.



When asked to rank the most important aspects of collaborating with a local physical therapist, PCPs highlighted the value of having access to the PT's findings in their initial evaluation and examination of the patient. They also indicated that it's helpful to know the PT's plan of care and the patient's goals for physical therapy.

Survey question: Thinking about the benefits of collaborating with a local physical therapist, please rank the top three in terms of importance for fostering the ideal PCP-PT collaborative relationship?



Challenges



While the positive findings from the survey should be encouraging to the physical therapy profession, a number of challenges were also identified. These include:

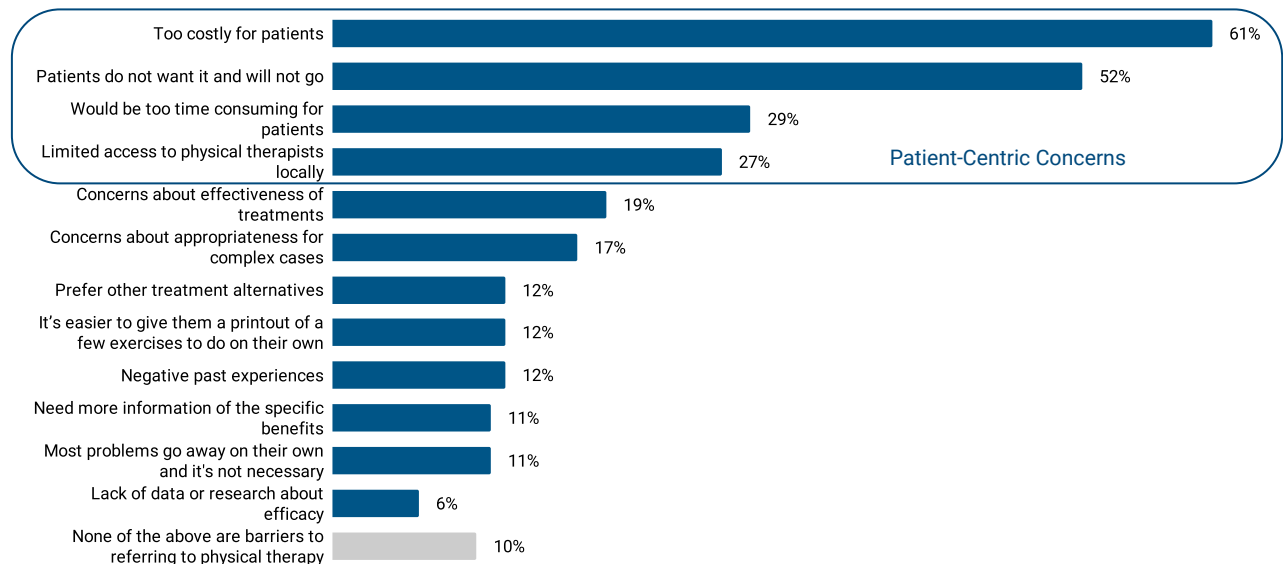
1. There are real and perceived barriers to physical therapy.
2. Many PCPs lack knowledge about physical therapy specialties.
3. There are not enough PTs in some areas.

Challenge 1: There Are Real and Perceived Barriers to Physical Therapy

Perhaps the most significant challenge identified through APTA's latest research involves PCPs' **"patient-centric concerns."** When asked to weigh in on why their professional peers might be hesitant to refer their patients to physical therapy, **more than 60% of respondents cited patient cost as a primary reason.** The belief that patients wouldn't want physical therapy was also high on their list of concerns, as were worries about patients' time requirements and limited access to local physical therapists.

Survey question: Below are reasons why some physicians may be hesitant to refer their patients to a physical therapist. Which of the following do you identify with most as reasons your peers may be hesitant to refer their patients to a physical therapist?

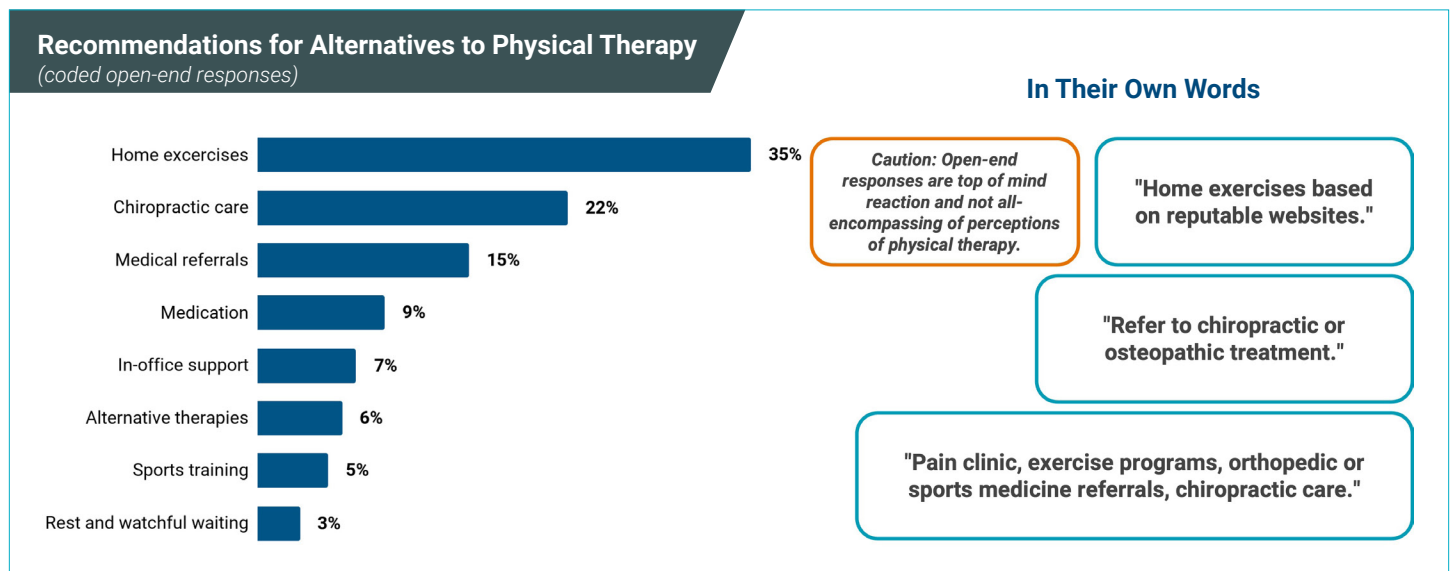
Barriers to Referring Patients to Physical Therapy



Challenges

Physician use of alternatives to physical therapy may also be preventing more patient referrals. More than a third of survey respondents believed physicians provided home exercises instead of a physical therapy referral for their patients. Other alternatives included prescribed medications or recommendations for patients to rest and wait. The prevalence of home exercise recommendations provides an opportunity for the profession to promote physical therapist-guided digital health options, pointing to findings from the [2024 report from Peterson Health Technology Institute](#) that digital health solutions guided by a physical therapist are superior to interventions that do not use a physical therapist.

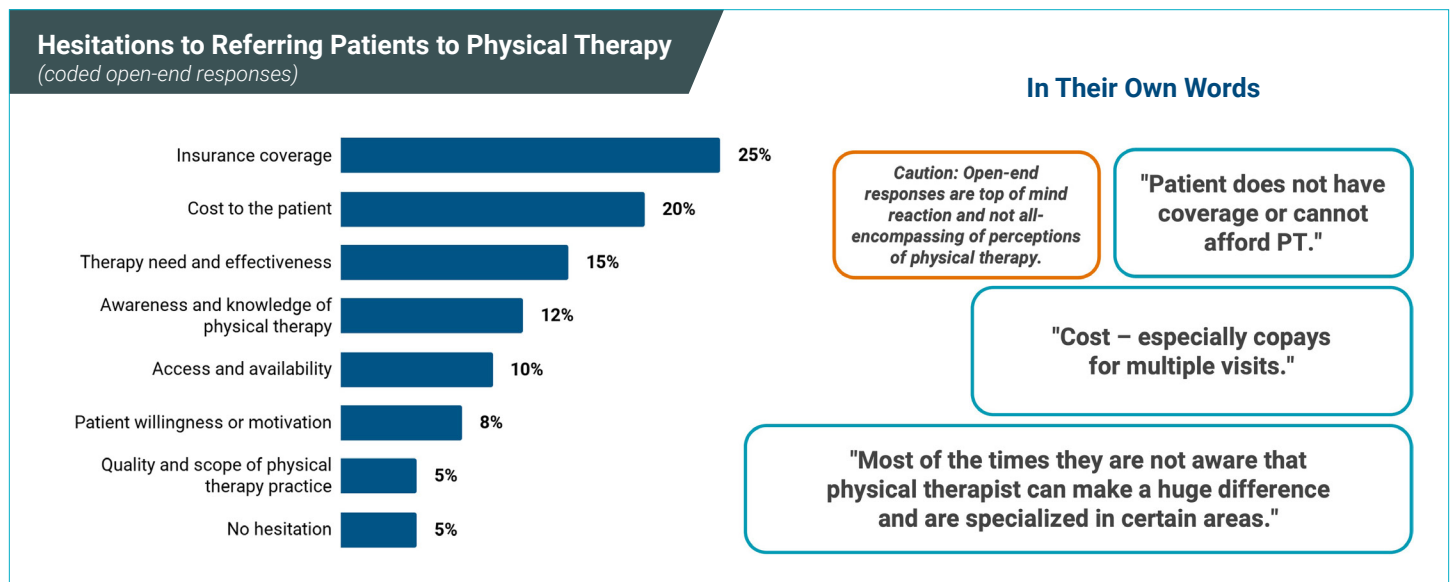
Survey question: What do you think are the most common recommendations from physicians as an alternative to physical therapy? Please list all you can think of.



Challenges

Beyond insurance coverage and cost concerns as reasons that some PCPs may be hesitant to refer patients to physical therapy, physicians cited a lack of understanding among patients that physical therapy is sometimes necessary and that it can be effective (15%) and lack of awareness and knowledge of physical therapy (12%). Combined, these represent a third major barrier standing in the way of referrals – **PCPs need help convincing their patients to try physical therapy**. This is consistent with other research showing there is still a lot of work to be done to improve consumer awareness about the benefits and value of physical therapy to convince some patients that it is worth their time and effort.

Survey question: What are the reasons you or other physicians may be hesitant to refer patients to a physical therapist?



Top Reasons Patients Skip Physical Therapy Referrals

1. Patients didn't feel they needed it, or symptoms went away on their own.
2. Patients couldn't get timely or convenient appointment times for initial evaluation or treatment sessions.
3. Patients lacked adequate insurance coverage for physical therapist services (especially among those who have never seen a PT).

These consumer-reported reasons are similar to and align with PCP perceptions that barriers to physical therapy are related to patient-centric concerns.

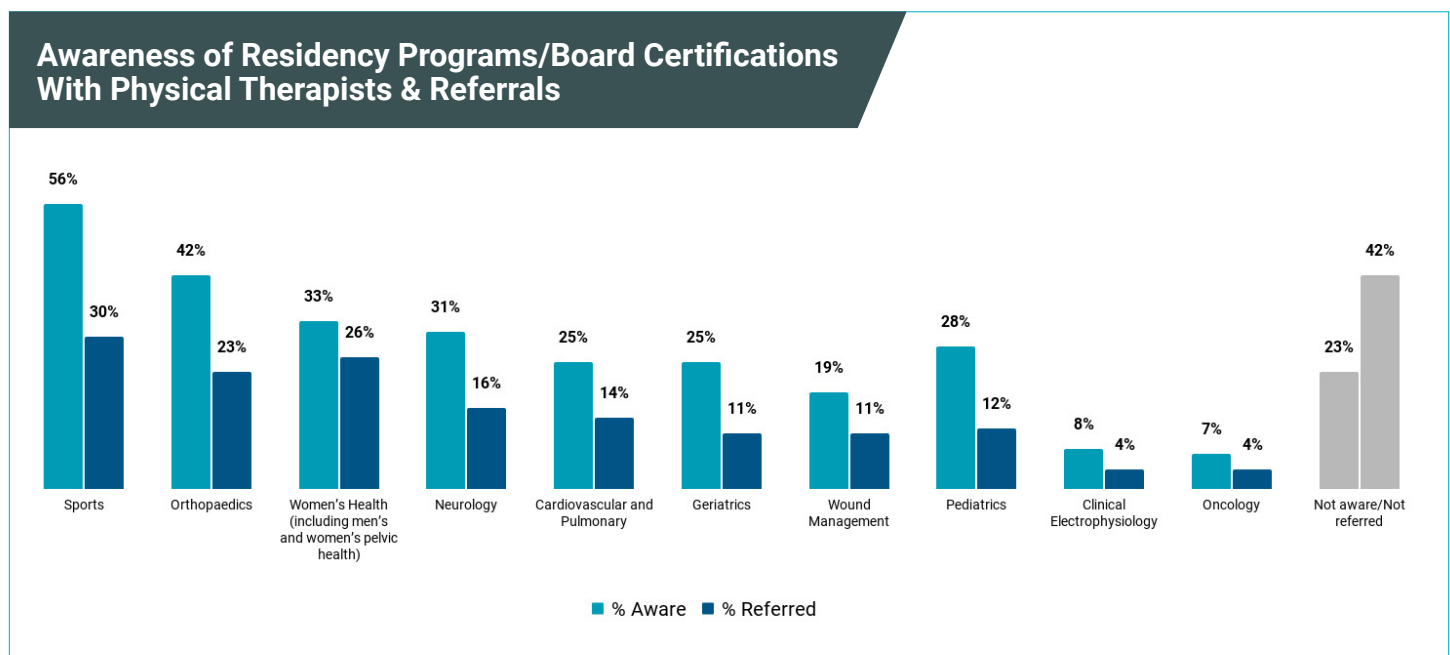
[Source: APTA Consumer Research Report, 2022](#)

Challenges

Challenge 2: Many PCPs Lack Knowledge About Physical Therapy Specialties

The survey found that only half of PCPs are aware that after earning a clinical doctoral degree, physical therapists can join a residency program and/or go on to earn board certification. It did reveal that PCPs are relatively knowledgeable about specialization in sports, orthopaedics, and women's health, but fewer than a third are aware of other specialty areas in physical therapy.

Survey questions: You indicated that you are aware of residency programs and/or board certifications governed by the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties. Which of the following have you heard of? Have you ever referred a patient to a physical therapist because the therapist has significant experience or board certification in a specialty area?

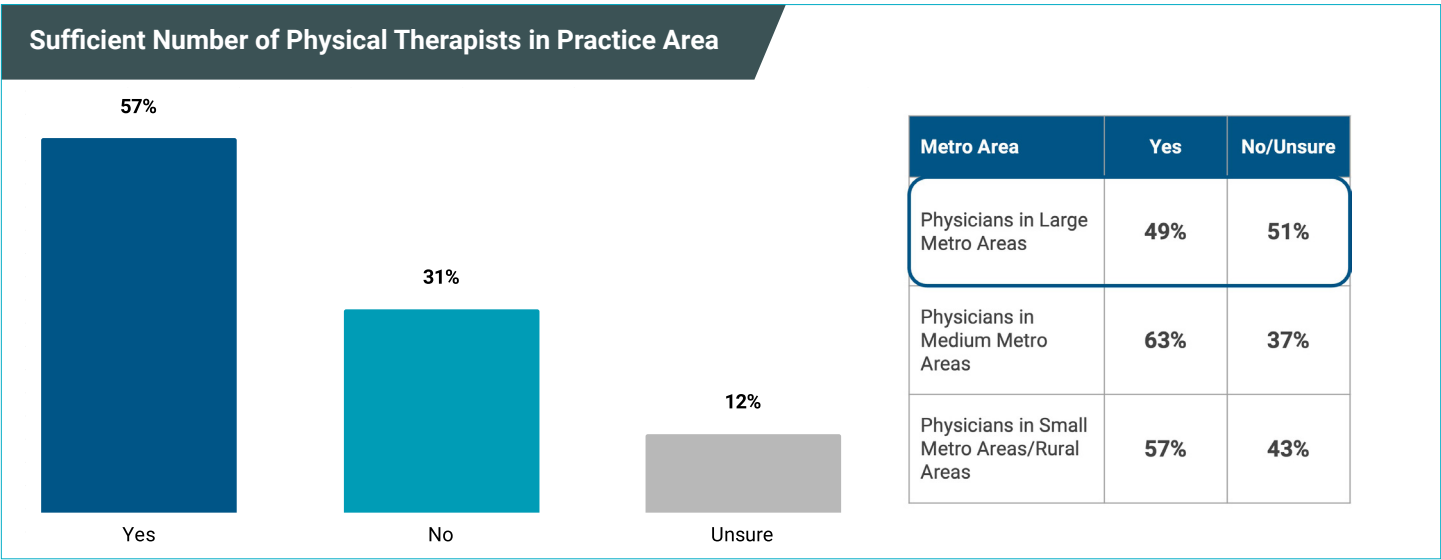


Challenges

Challenge 3: There Are Not Enough PTs in Some Areas

The survey revealed that **less than 60% of PCPs believe that their geographic area has enough physical therapists and physical therapy clinics to support patient needs.** This perceived shortage may effectively limit the number of referrals to physical therapy for patients who could benefit from it by causing some physicians to be more selective in which patients and conditions they refer to physical therapy. It also could lead some physicians to provide home exercises for patients to do on their own without the help of a physical therapist.

Survey question: Do you believe there are a sufficient number of physical therapists and physical therapy clinics in your practice area?



Note: U.S. Bureau of Statistics data, as well as two APTA workforce reports, can help shed additional light on the availability of PTs. [APTA's 2023 Physical Therapy Profile: Demographics of the Profession report](#) includes data on the geographic distribution of PTs in a given area per 100,000 people. The association's [2024 Benchmark Hiring Challenges report](#) shows an overall vacancy rate of 9.5% for physical therapy positions nationwide. The vacancies are due primarily to increasing demand for physical therapist services — industry growth — for which hiring hasn't kept up. Data on vacancy rates vary by region and may support or align with some PCPs' perception that there is a lack of available PTs and clinics in their area.

Drivers of Referrals to Specific PTs



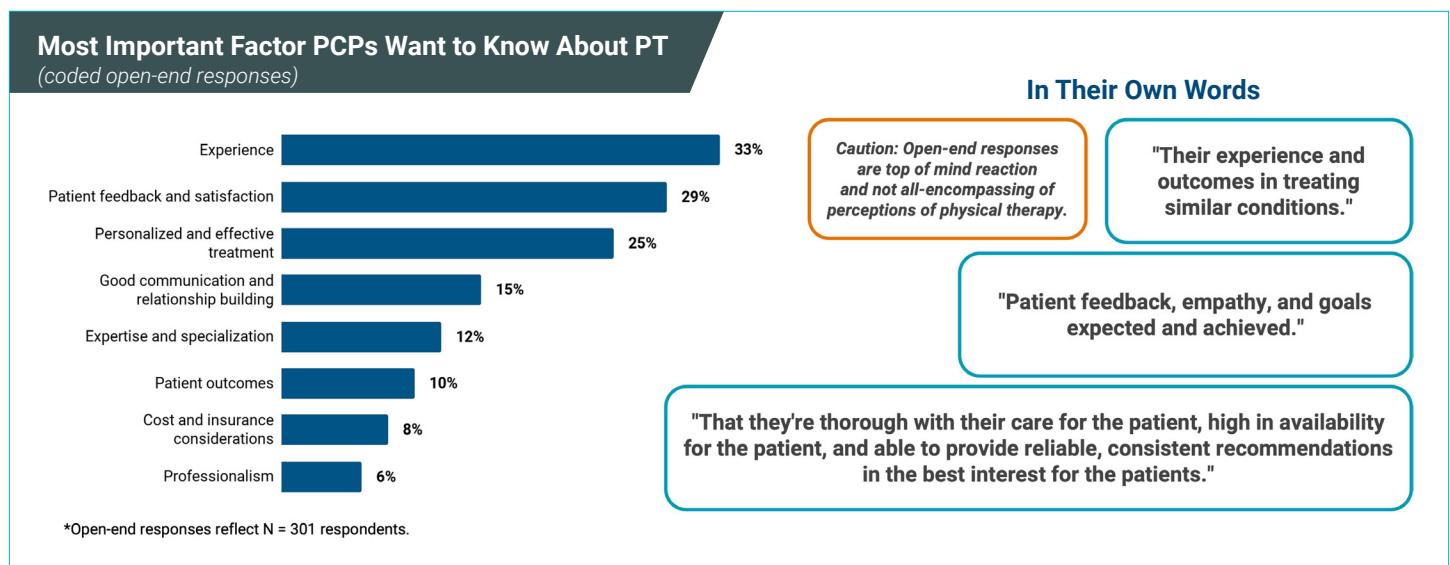
The survey sought to determine what factors are most important to PCPs when they're deciding whether to refer a patient to a specific physical therapist. Three key drivers were identified:

1. The PT's competence, experience, and reputation.
2. The PT's willingness to collaborate and communicate with other providers.
3. Patient satisfaction with a specific physical therapist.

Factor 1: PT Competence, Experience, and Reputation

Clinical experience and competence topped the list of factors PCPs keep in mind when referring patients to physical therapy. They want to know whether the PT has successfully provided personalized treatment for other patients with similar conditions, and they want to know what those patients thought about the care they received. When combining experience with expertise and specializations, a strong case can be made for specialist certification as one way to demonstrate enhanced experience and expertise.

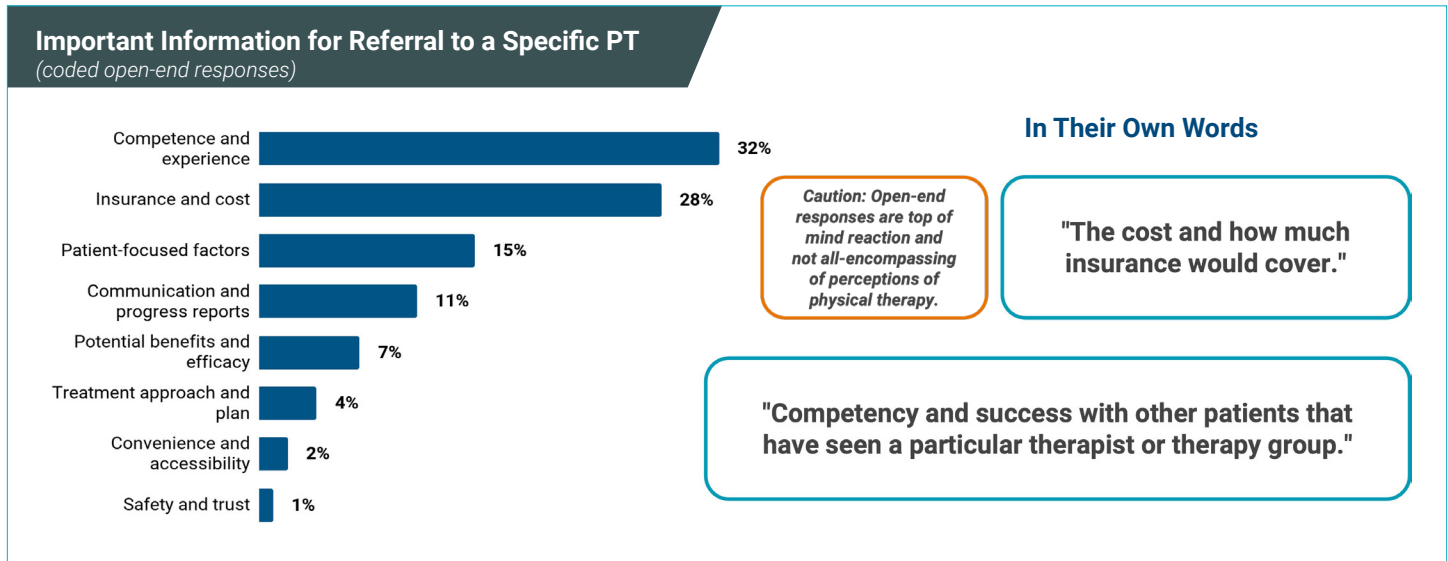
Survey question: In your own words, what is the most important factor you would like to know about a physical therapist in order to feel comfortable referring your patients to them?



The survey even found that competence and experience are slightly more important than the cost of care and how much of that cost would be covered by insurance.

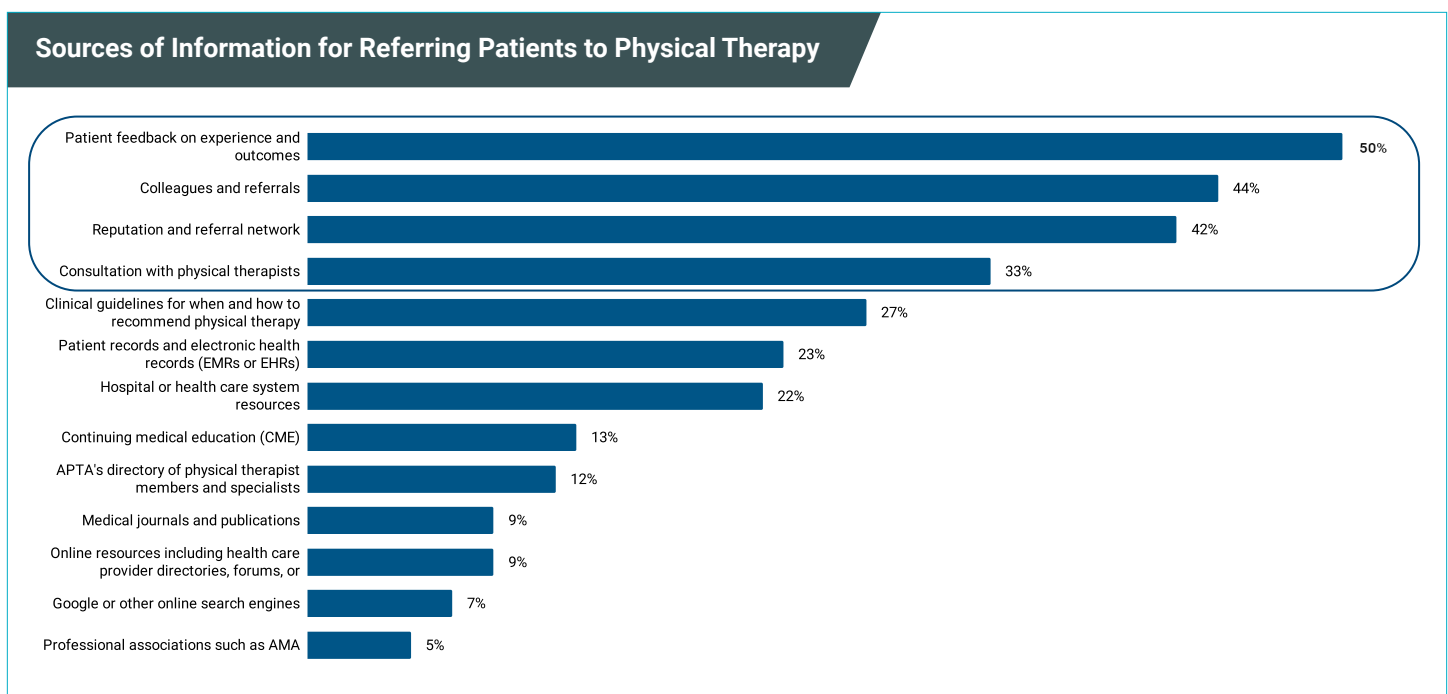
Drivers of Referrals to Specific PTs

Survey question: What information is most important for you to have when considering referring your patients to a physical therapist?



Finally, respondents indicated that the **opinions of their medical colleagues and the PT's reputation** play important roles in referral decisions.

Survey question: Which of the following sources of information are most important when gathering information on physical therapy and physical therapists to refer your patients to?

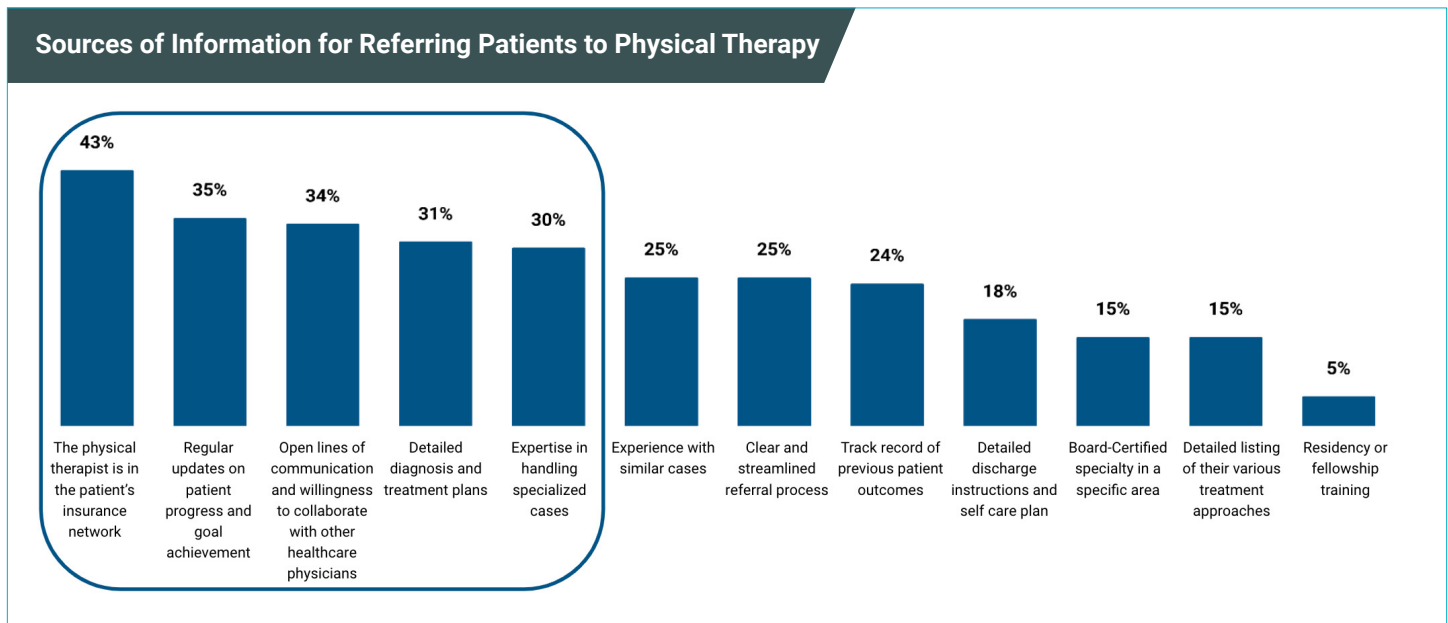


Drivers of Referrals to Specific PTs

Factor 2: Collaboration and Communication

The survey found that PCPs are looking for collaborative relationships with physical therapists. They value PTs who communicate readily, who willingly share their diagnoses and treatment plans, and who provide regular updates on their patients.

Survey question: Which of the following pieces of information is most important for you to have in order to feel comfortable referring a patient to a specific physical therapist?



While cost and insurance coverage were important factors from an accessibility standpoint, factors related to a PCP's comfort level in referring to a specific PT revolve around collaboration, communication, and the PT's expertise.

In a related finding, the survey found that PCPs view PT professionalism as the most important driver for improving PCP-PT relationships, among these factors:

1. Professionalism.
2. Ability to demonstrate effectiveness and value with objective data.
3. Collaboration with referring PCP and other care team members.
4. Practice that is consistent with evolving evidence.

Drivers of Referrals to Specific PTs

Factor 3: Patient Satisfaction With Physical Therapy

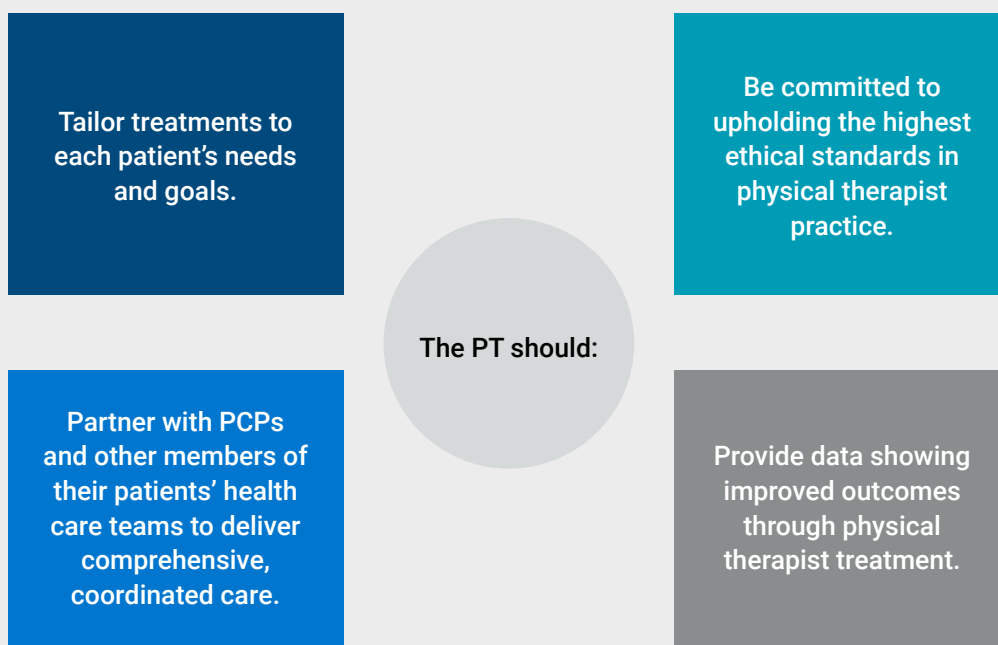
Another critical driver for PCPs referring patients to specific physical therapists is patient satisfaction. They want to know not only whether patients received effective treatment but also the kind of individualized and compassionate care that would lead them to return to that PT in the future.

Patient Satisfaction: Top Considerations for PCPs in Determining Whether to Refer

1. The patient received individualized care based on their needs and goals.
2. The patient received effective treatment.
3. The PT listened and communicated clearly and understandably.
4. The PT was a responsible steward of their patient's resources.
5. The PT provided compassionate and empathetic care.

Building Trust Among Patients and PCPs

As part of the research for this report, the Penta Group also conducted key driver analysis on several attributes. They identified the following four drivers of trust and confidence that PTs should embody in order to solidify the PCP-PT relationship and build trust with potential and actual patients:



Comparing and Contrasting Perceptions

Compare and Contrast: Consumers, PCPs, and APTA Members

When compared with the findings from the [APTA Consumer Awareness Research report](#) published in 2022, the PCP survey revealed several interesting areas of alignment between primary care physicians' and consumers' perceptions of physical therapy. It also revealed some differences in opinion on access and referrals and on the barriers preventing patients from going to physical therapy.

Perceptions Comparison: Primary Care Physicians Versus Consumers

Area	Consumers**	PCPs*
Provider of choice	PTs are providers of choice after PCP and other physicians	PTs are providers of choice over orthopedic/sports medicine physicians, OTs, and chiropractors
Perception of PTs	92% view PTs very positively or somewhat positively	92% report high level of trust in PTs; 95% view the profession very positively
Consumer experience/ patient satisfaction	92% report a positive experience with physical therapy (60% very positive, 32% somewhat positive)	99% believe patients are satisfied with physical therapy (69% extremely satisfied, 30% somewhat satisfied)
Value most	• Effective treatment • Fixing their problem • Return to previous state	• PT expertise/experience • Patient satisfaction • Personalized treatment
PT-PCP collaboration	Want providers to collaborate but see PTs as not engaged in collaboration with PCPs	• Welcome collaboration with PTs • Want open communication about diagnoses and treatment plans

Opinions on Access, Referrals, and Barriers

Area	Consumers**	PCPs*
Access to physical therapy	• See PCPs as gatekeepers • Have little interest in direct access	88% want more patients to use physical therapy
Referrals given/usage	• 87% see PTs only because physician refers • 35% skip referrals	• 86% regularly refer • 14% sometimes refer • 95% very likely to refer in the future
Barriers to physical therapy	• Time limitations • Cost/insurance coverage • Convenience	Patient-centric concerns (cost, time, limited access to local PTs, patients don't want to go)

*Based on APTA's 2024 survey of PCPs.

**Based on the 2022 APTA Consumer Awareness Research Report.

In addition, APTA members believed that physicians were a major barrier preventing patients from accessing physical therapy. The current survey of PCPs and the consumer research, however, indicate that the barriers to access are mostly patient-centric. PCPs would like their patients to go to physical therapy more often than patients do.

Opportunities



The purpose of this PCP-focused report, as well as APTA's previous consumer research, is twofold. First, the report highlights for members what survey participants think about PTs and the profession. Second, APTA will leverage the input of both PCPs and consumers to create new messaging, resources, and educational opportunities to move the profession of physical therapy forward. The report findings point to six main opportunities.

Opportunity 1: Develop New Strategies for Increased Collaboration With and Outreach to PCPs

PCPs' perceptions of physical therapy, physician-reported patient-centric barriers, and the drivers of referrals to develop new strategies for increased collaboration are important considerations for the profession.

The research found that barriers are less about the PCPs' perception of credibility and more about their perceived lack of accessibility for patients and their perceptions of patient-centric barriers that can be overcome with strategic communications. These barriers include patients' lack of awareness and education, which dissuades them from wanting to try physical therapy, and patients' beliefs that physical therapy is too costly and time-consuming. APTA and its members should strive to better understand and address these PCP perceptions.

PCPs indicate they welcome collaboration with physical therapists to improve the quality of care and outcomes and want to work with PTs who share patient diagnosis, treatment plans, and other information to inform patient care. In the 2022 survey, consumers indicated their desire for their physical therapist and physicians (or others on their health care team) to collaborate on their treatment and coordinate care to improve overall treatment success. PTs should look for opportunities to collaborate with local PCPs who are eager to partner with them for better patient care.

Opportunity 2: Embrace the Synergetic Relationship Between PCPs and Patients

Embracing the synergetic relationship between PCPs and patients and identifying ways to support PCPs in their interactions with the patients they refer to and believe will benefit from physical therapy has the potential to drive more patients to physical therapy clinics.

To encourage more referrals, APTA and its members should communicate with PCPs and the public to educate patients about physical therapy's benefits and value and develop resources to educate patients during the physician-patient conversation and in the primary care exam or waiting room. Outreach materials for consumers and referring providers and their patients should incorporate key messages designed to build trust.

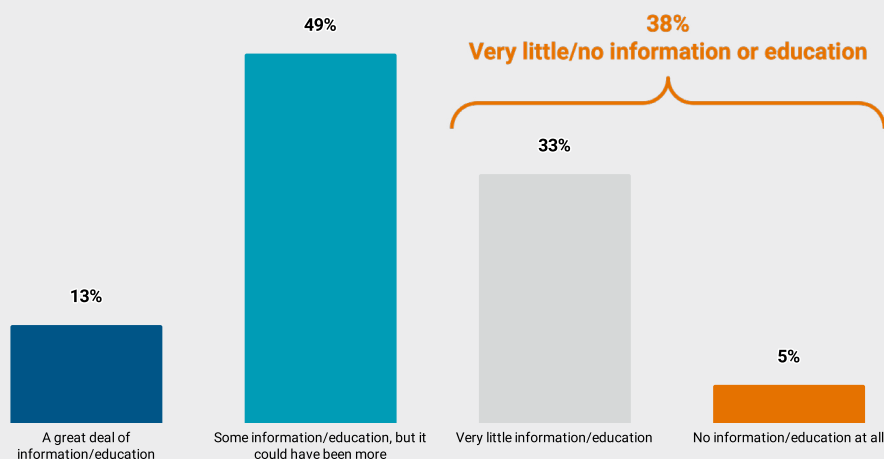
Opportunity 3: Advance Policies That Expand Access and Coverage for Physical Therapist Services

APTA should continue to focus on recommending changes to government and payer policies that limit access to physical therapist services. When possible, citing evidence and research that demonstrates physical therapy can save costs downstream and can be as or more effective than other interventions may be valuable to decision makers.

Opportunities

Survey question: How much information/education did you gain about physical therapy in medical school, residency, or anywhere in your education?

Information on Physical Therapy in PCP Education



Age	Great Deal/Some Information	Very Little/No Information
All PCPs	62%	38%
Under 45	74%	26%
45-54	52%	48%
55+	56%	44%

Opportunity 4: Raise Awareness Among PCPs About Physical Therapy, Including PT Education, PT Specializations, and the Conditions PTs Treat

While physicians want to work with experienced and competent PTs, many are unaware of the educational requirements for physical therapists. Many are also unaware of the physical therapist specialties and subspecialties available to PTs through residency, board certification, and fellowship training. APTA and its members should inform PCPs about PTs' education level and clinical experience required for licensure and acquired through the profession's advanced learning pathways. Since physicians receive very little information during medical school about physical therapy, there is also a need to educate PCPs about the many symptoms and conditions PTs manage.

Opportunity 5: Leverage Digital Health Options to Provide Needed Access

Physical therapists who offer telehealth, remote therapeutic monitoring, and other digital health technologies that can increase access to treatment for patients in underserved or rural areas may want to approach PCPs who may not be referring their patients to physical therapy due to a lack of nearby clinics and PTs. Telehealth technologies also can be promoted as an option for patients for whom travel is difficult or time constraints and caregiver concerns are barriers.

Opportunity 6: Continue to Create Awareness of the Value and Benefits of Physical Therapy Among Consumers

APTA and its members should continue to enhance efforts to raise public awareness about physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and the value and benefits of services they provide. This includes educating consumers about physical therapist treatment for the many symptoms and conditions PTs treat as well as their role in prevention and overall fitness and wellness.