

APTA Consumer Perceptions

A Report From the American Physical Therapy Association



September 2025

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Background

The American Physical Therapy Association's journey in consumer research began in 2007, with its first survey conducted by Matrix Marketing Research Group. Follow-up surveys in 2016 and 2021, led by SMS Research (a subsidiary of Padilla/CRT), provided valuable insights that shaped key initiatives, including the launch of the ChoosePT brand and website, the formation of APTA's Media Corps, and collaborative content development with APTA's academies, sections, and chapters. These efforts have helped amplify public awareness campaigns, reaching millions of Americans each year.

For the 2025 consumer survey, APTA partnered with two expert firms:

- Penta Group, known for using data-driven research to help nonprofits engage their audiences and gather public opinion.
- BRG Communications, an award-winning agency recognized for its evidence-based approach to public relations strategy focused on healthier living.

The 2025 survey aimed to:

- Measure public awareness and perceptions of physical therapy's role in prevention and optimal living.
- Identify gaps in consumer understanding among potential patient populations.
- Uncover new media insights to drive development of key messaging for APTA's next ChoosePT public awareness campaign.

Highlights

- Americans increasingly focus on staying mobile, independent, and enjoying life as they age.
- However, many are unaware of the full benefits physical therapy offers, especially those related to its role in preventing injury, supporting long-term wellness, and promoting independent aging across the lifespan.
- As a result, physical therapy is often only seen as a reactive solution — something to turn to after a medical event, injury, or pain — rather than a proactive tool to optimize one's health span (the period of life spent in good health, free from serious disease or disability).
- The good news: When people learn about the full benefits of physical therapy, such as improving movement at any age or fitness level, preventing injury, and supporting women's health, they're more likely to seek care proactively.

Closing the Consumer Awareness Gap and Informing: APTA will use these insights to shape a new, multiyear ChoosePT public awareness campaign. The goal is to close awareness gaps and reframe physical therapists as an essential resource for lifelong wellness — not just for recovery but as a proactive partner in quality of life — from pediatrics to older adults.



Research Method

An online survey was conducted with a total of 1,199 responses between May 1 and May 14, 2025. Respondents had the following characteristics:

- 1,001 U.S. general population
- 280 patients who have used physical therapy in the past year
- 214 prospective patients who have considered but not used physical therapy in the last five years
- 218 mothers and intended mothers who are expecting, have given birth in the last two years, or intend to become pregnant in the next three years
- 344 recreational sports participants (hereafter referred to as recreational athletes)

The sampling margin of error is +/- 3.1%. The margin of error for subsamples may be higher.

Note: Due to rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

Table 1. Respondents

Age of Respondents	
18-24	16%
25-34	17%
35-44	17%
45-54	16%
55-64	14%
65+	20%
Race/Ethnicity of Respondents	
White/Caucasian	60%
Hispanic/Latino	18%
Black/African or Caribbean American	13%
Asian	4%
Other	5%
Sex	
Male	48%
Female	52%

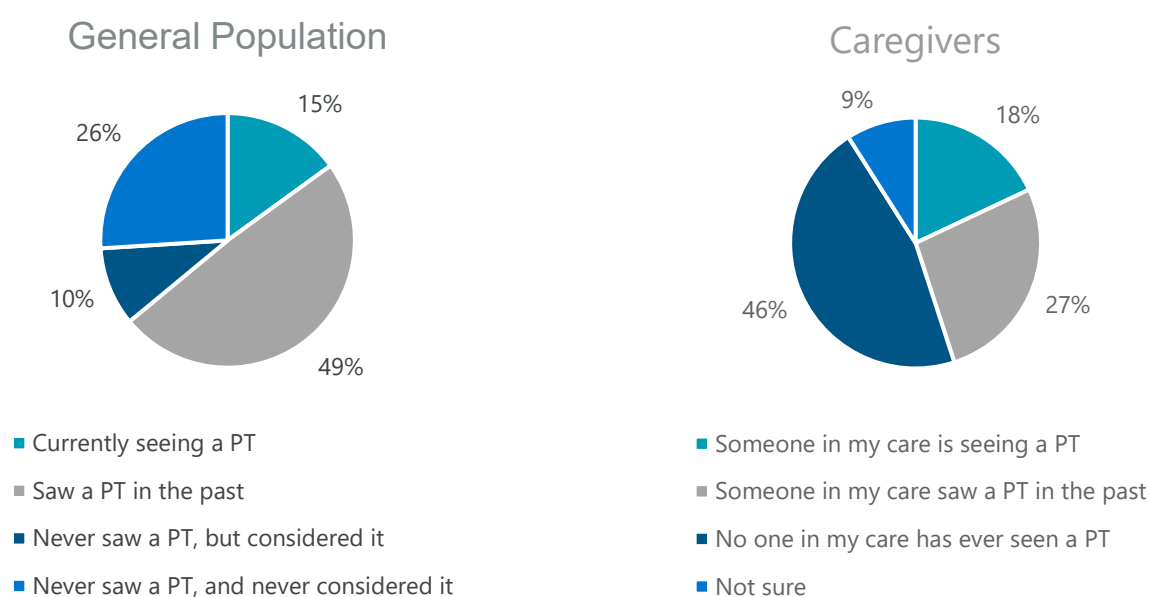
The Physical Therapy State of Play

Physical Therapy Prevalence in American Households

Physical therapy has a broad reach (Figure 1). According to survey data, 74% of Americans have received physical therapy or considered seeing a physical therapist. Among caregivers, 45% report that someone in their care is seeing or has seen a PT.

Figure 1: Reach of Physical Therapy

Q: Which of the following best describes your experience with physical therapy?



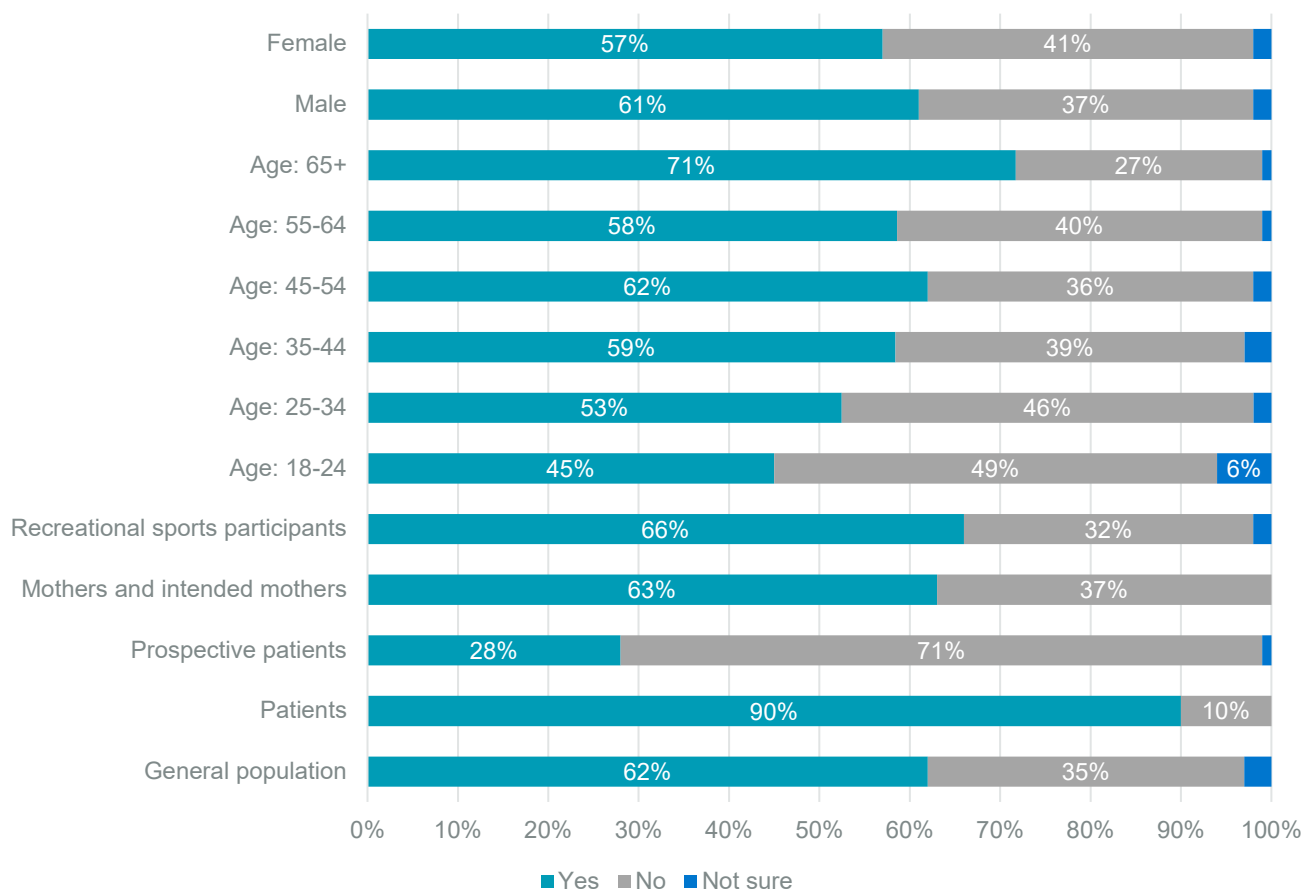
Referrals to physical therapy show notable variation across age groups and demographics (Figure 2).

Generally, referral rates increase with age, except for adults ages 55-64, who report fewer referrals than the slightly younger 45-54 age group. Men are 4% more likely to be referred than women, and recreational athletes are 4% more likely to receive referrals than the general population.

Among physical therapy patients, 90% were referred to physical therapy by a physician. Among prospective patients (those who say they have considered or are considering seeing a PT), 28% have received a referral but have **not** initiated services, while 71% are exploring physical therapy independently.

Figure 2. Referrals to Physical Therapy by Group

Q: Have you ever been referred to a physical therapist by a physician?



Americans' Health Priorities

Physical therapy aligns with Americans' top health priorities (Figure 3). Physical therapists are uniquely positioned to support what Americans care most about regarding their health. Survey results show that people prioritize:

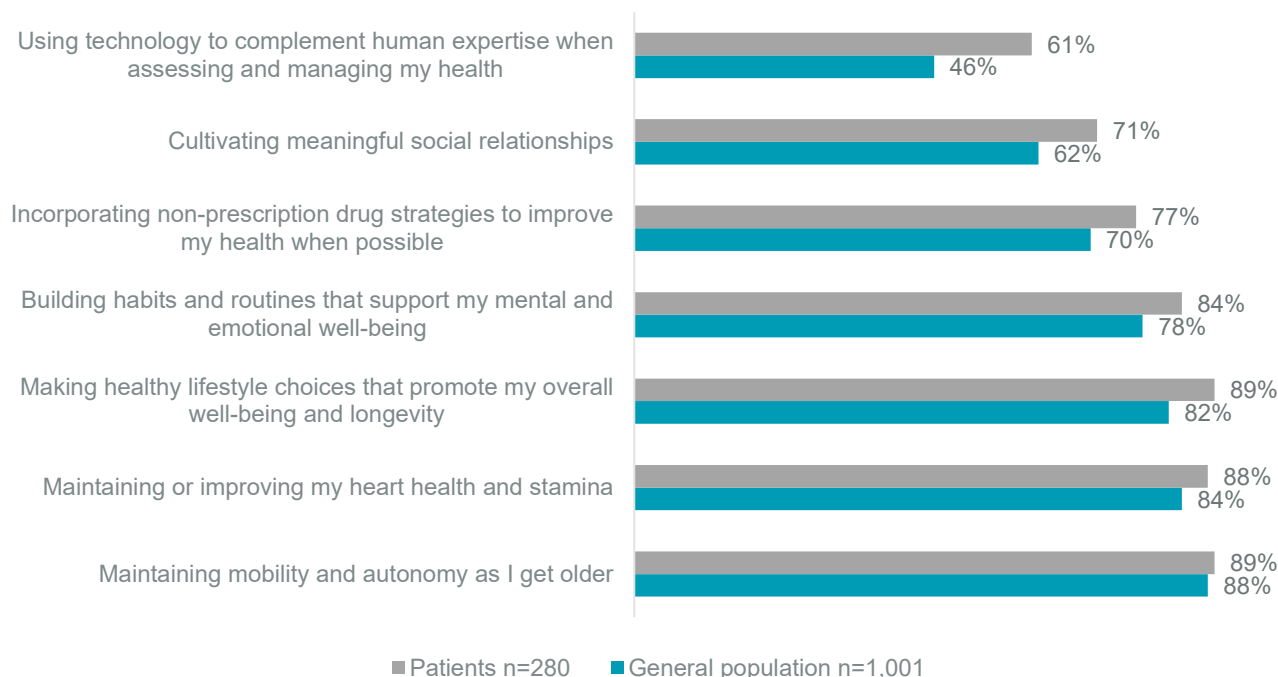
- Maintaining mobility and independence as they age (88%-89%)
- Improving heart health and stamina (84%-88%)
- Making healthy lifestyle choices (82%-89%)
- Supporting mental and emotional well-being (78%-84%)

There is also a strong preference for nonprescription approaches to managing pain, with 70%-77% of respondents favoring alternative strategies over medication when possible. While integration of technology is still emerging — with only 46%-61% currently viewing it as important for managing health — there is a growing opportunity. As more physical therapists adopt digital tools, such as wearable devices and remote monitoring, they are positioned to enhance patient engagement and build consumer trust in tech-enabled care.

These insights reveal a powerful alignment between what consumers value in their health journey and the unique expertise of physical therapists. As awareness grows, more Americans will see PTs as ideal partners in helping them live healthier, longer, and more independent lives.

Figure 3: Americans' Health Priorities

Q: How important is each of the following to you?



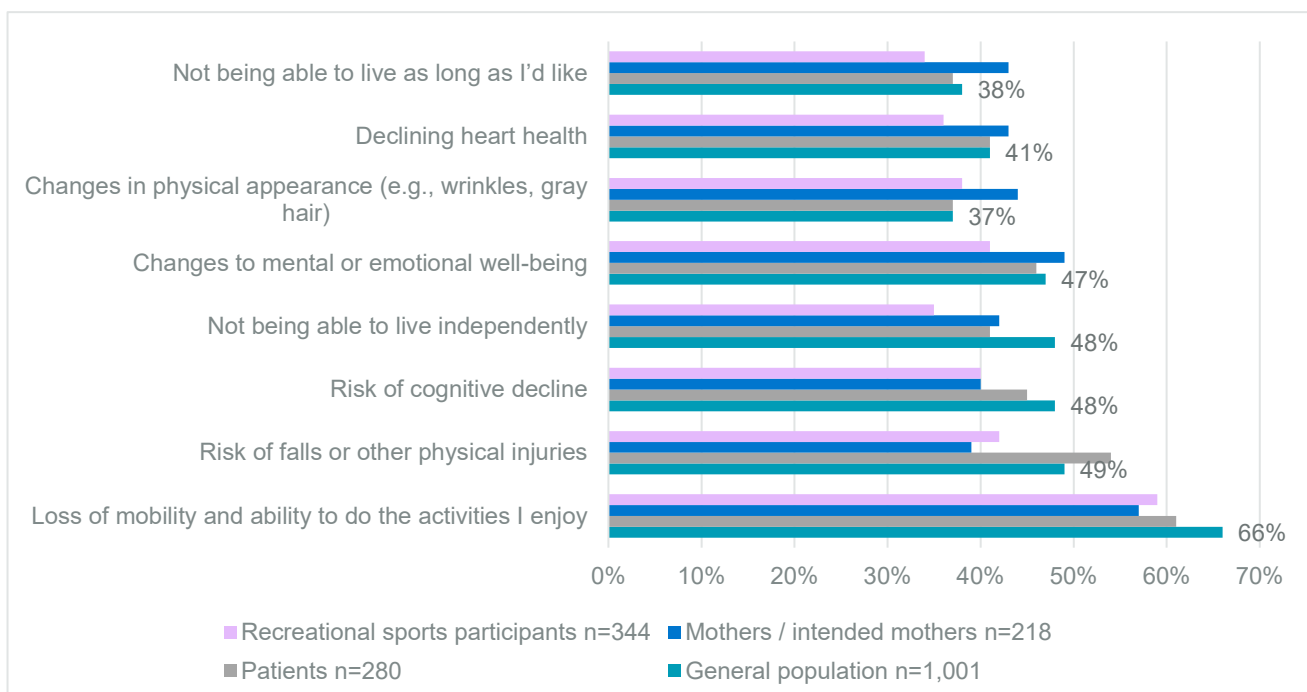


Loss of mobility is the leading concern among Americans around aging (Figure 4). In fact, 66% of the general population and 61% of patients say maintaining mobility is their top priority, outpacing other concerns like falls, cognitive decline, emotional well-being, heart health, and longevity by 17 to 28 percentage points.

Because mobility is closely tied to a sense of freedom, identity, and quality of life, these findings underscore the importance of helping consumers understand how PTs and PTAs play a vital role in preserving what people value most. Public awareness efforts should emphasize physical therapy's role in empowering individuals to achieve their long-term health goals through proactive physical therapy and early intervention.

Figure 4: Americans' Top Concerns About Aging

Q: As you get older, what concerns do you have about aging?



Patients are more willing to see a physical therapist for support in promoting their long-term health than they are to seek financial planning advice (Table 2). While Americans embrace everyday wellness

habits, just 32% say they are willing to proactively seek expert guidance from PTs or financial planners, respectively. Prior experience with physical therapy increases willingness to seek physical therapist services, with 54% of patients saying they would seek a PT's assessment and advice.



These findings reflect a growing public focus on wellness and a shift toward proactive health management, presenting an opportunity to raise awareness that PTs are highly qualified to support individuals in achieving their long-term wellness goals.

Besides prior patients, groups with the highest potential for engaging in preventative physical therapy include:

- Mothers and intended mothers at 42% are 31% more willing than the general public to book a preventive visit with a PT.
- Recreational athletes at 40% are 25% more willing than the general public to see a PT proactively.

Table 2. Actions Americans Are Willing to Take for Their Future Well-Being

<i>What are you willing to do now to enhance your future well-being as you get older?</i>	General population n=1,001	Patients n=280	Prospective patients n=214	Mothers / intended mothers n=218	Recreational sports participants n=344
Exercise for 30 minutes at least five times a week	66%	60%	66%	62%	67%
Keep my mind sharp (e.g., by reading regularly, taking a class, learning a new skill, etc.)	65%	66%	70%	61%	64%
Prioritize my sleep (7-9 hours a night) to promote cognitive health	63%	59%	60%	61%	56%
Take health / nutritional supplements daily to ensure adequate nutrition intake	57%	55%	59%	58%	52%
Change my diet to prioritize nutritious, filling meals and avoid processed foods	56%	56%	57%	61%	50%
Seek advice from a financial planner to assess and adjust my financial goals as needed	32%	40%	32%	31%	38%
See a physical therapist for a personalized health assessment and expert advice to promote long-term wellness	32%	54%	38%	42%	40%
Stop smoking or drinking alcohol, if applicable	26%	33%	28%	36%	28%
Volunteer regularly to build community and give back to others	23%	27%	23%	22%	29%

Recreational athletes recognize the value of PTs' expert guidance (Figure 5).

While both athletes and the general population tend to rely on everyday strategies to manage pain from physical activity, athletes are notably more proactive: **27%** seek guidance from a PT, compared with **17%** of the general population.

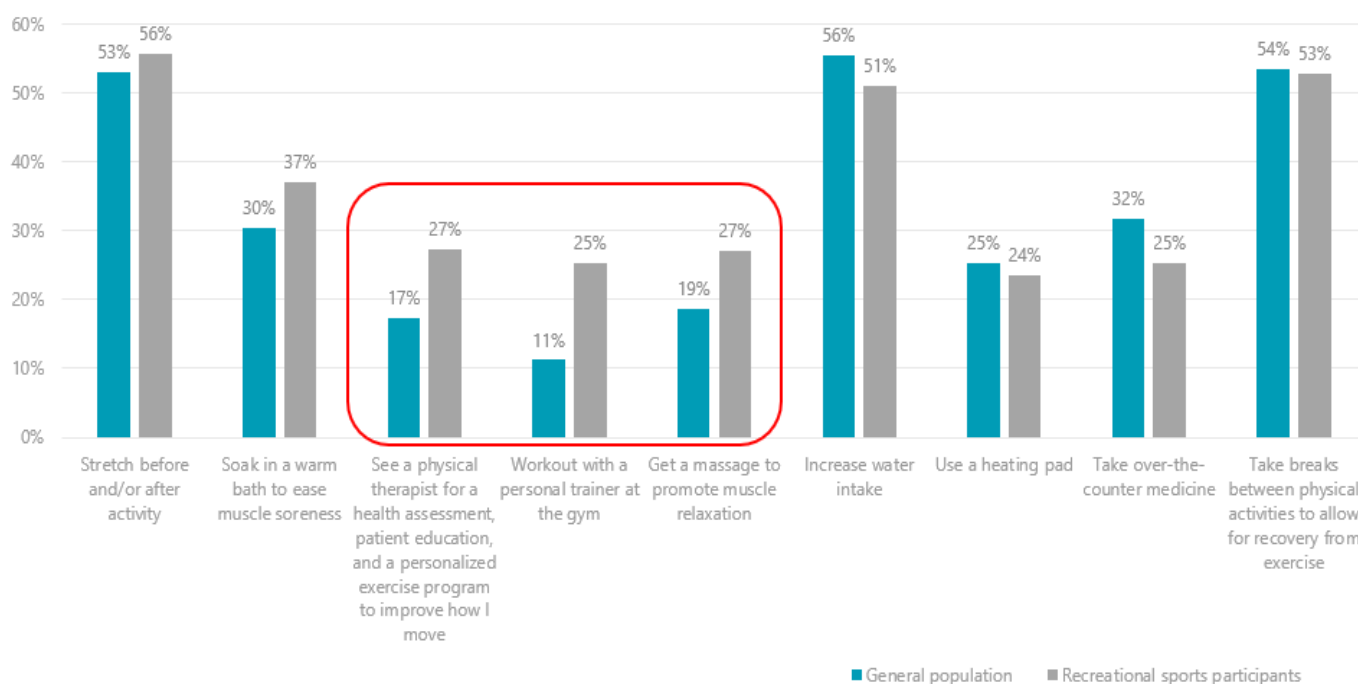
Still, physical therapy is often viewed on par with personal training and massage therapy for wellness and prevention. This presents a key opportunity: targeted messaging that positions physical therapy as a proactive, expert-led approach to improving movement efficiency, preventing injuries, relieving pain, and building functional strength can help drive greater adoption among recreational athletes.



By reframing physical therapy as a performance-enhancing and injury-prevention resource — not just a recovery tool — more of this audience can begin to see PTs as essential partners in their athletic journey.

Figure 5. Recreational Athletes More Likely to Seek Physical Therapy or Other Hands-On Support

Q: What do you do to avoid or reduce pain during or after exercise or strenuous physical activity?



American mothers overlook the benefits of physical therapy during the pre- and postpartum periods.

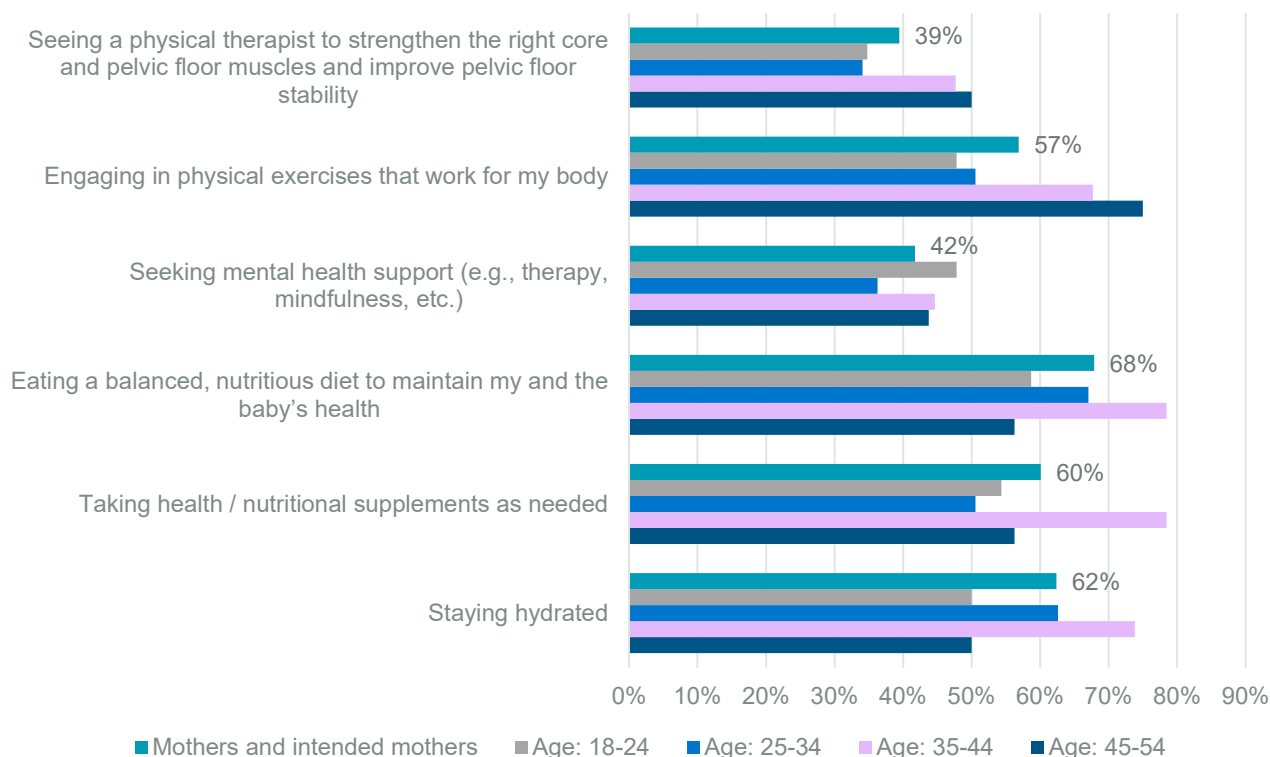
Many pregnant women may be unaware of the benefits physical therapy offers. While 39% of mothers and intended mothers report seeing a PT during or after pregnancy — a meaningful figure given physical therapy's relatively recent integration into routine maternal care — there is still significant room to grow awareness and access.

This population represents a key opportunity for outreach. Proactive messaging that highlights physical therapy's role in helping pregnant women stay active, prevent complications like incontinence, and recover well after childbirth can drive greater demand for pelvic health physical therapy.



Figure 6. Physical Therapy Usage Around Pregnancy

Q: How do you take care of your body to get ready for pregnancy, give birth, and get back to feeling yourself after your baby is born? (Among mothers and intended mothers, and by age group). Note: As to be expected, the sample size of mothers ages 45-54 is small (n=16).



Strengths

Key Theme 1: Americans Hold Strongly Positive Views of Physical Therapists

Survey results show that **Americans overwhelmingly have a favorable impression of physical therapists (Figure 5)**. The survey found that 89% of patients, 84% of recreational athletes, and 81% of mothers or intended mothers have a somewhat or very positive impression. Respondents cited reasons such as PTs' specialized training and education, personal experiences with care, and stories shared by friends and family. These findings reflect a deep trust in the profession and a strong foundation for expanding public awareness of physical therapy's broader benefits. They also are consistent with findings from past consumer awareness surveys.

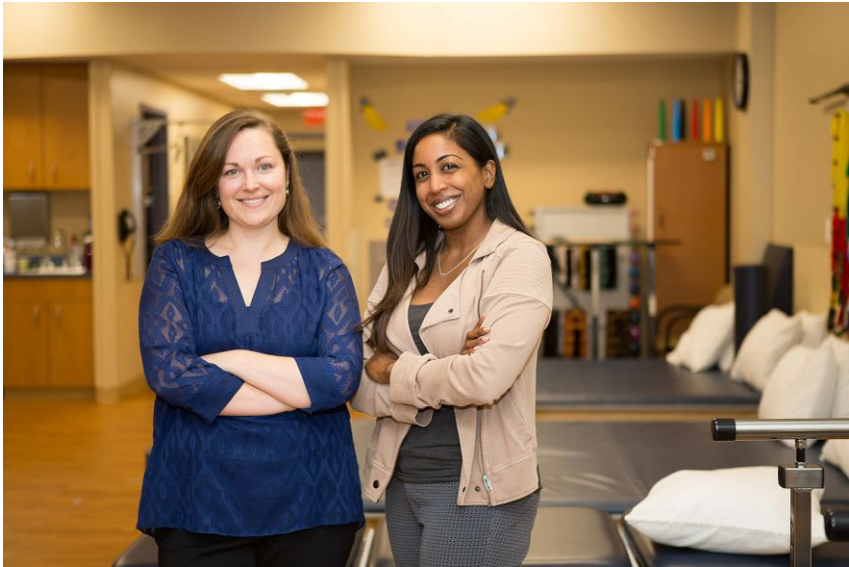
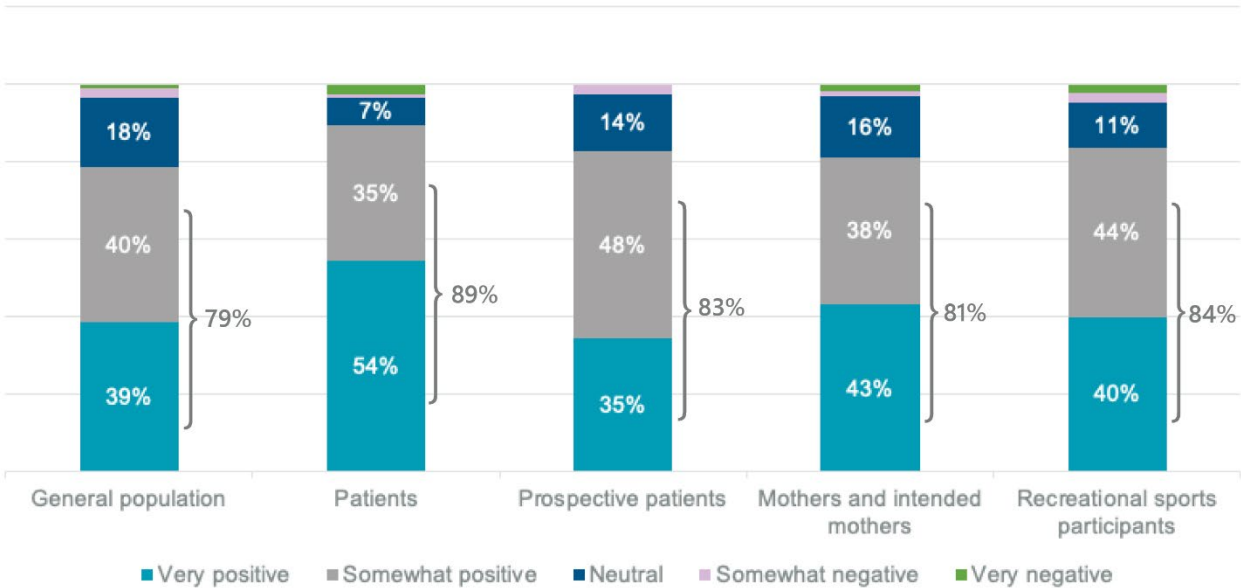


Figure 7: Overall Impression of PTs in 2025

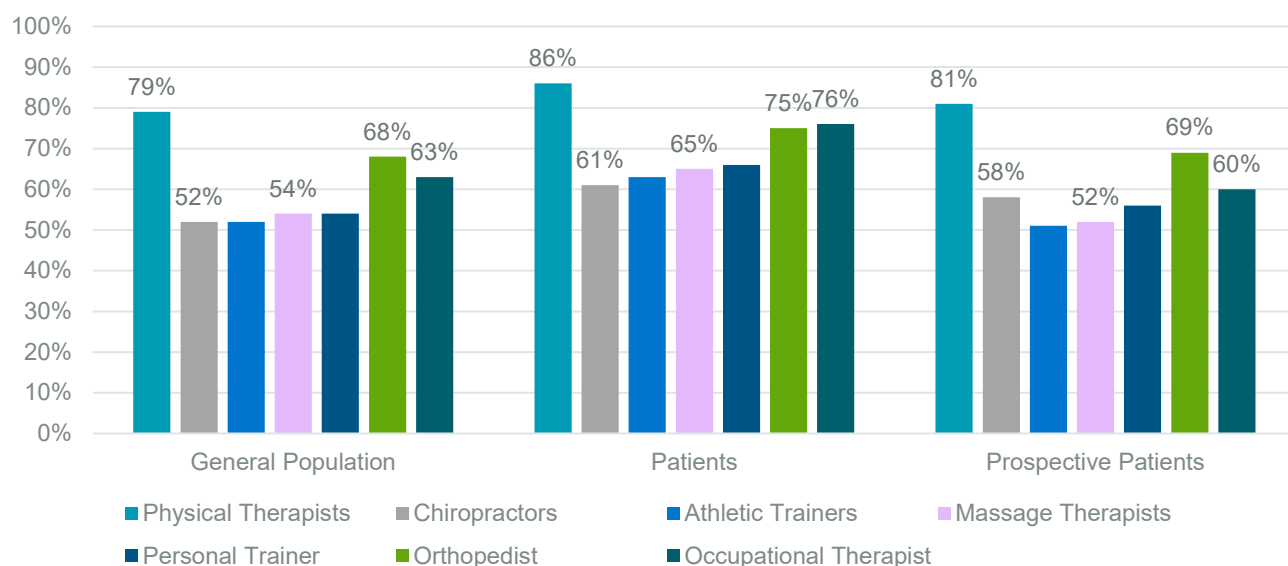
Q: Overall, what would you say that your general impression of physical therapists is?



Physical therapists are among the most trusted health and wellness providers (Figure 6). Americans place a higher trust in physical therapists than in similar providers. Among the general population, PTs lead orthopedists by 11 percentage points and chiropractors by 27 percentage points. Overall, nearly 8 in 10 Americans consider PTs to be trustworthy. Among patients who have experienced physical therapy, that number increases to almost 9 in 10.

Figure 8: PTs Are Most Trusted Among Similar Providers

Q: When it comes to health advice, how trustworthy do you find the following groups? (Showing percent of those who responded with somewhat or very trustworthy.)



Key Theme 2: Public Awareness Is Solid But Gaps Remain

The majority of Americans have a solid understanding of physical therapists' professional standards and qualifications to practice (Figure 9). Two-thirds (68%) of the general population and 72% of patients are aware that PTs must pass national and state exams, be licensed in their state, and complete continuing education.

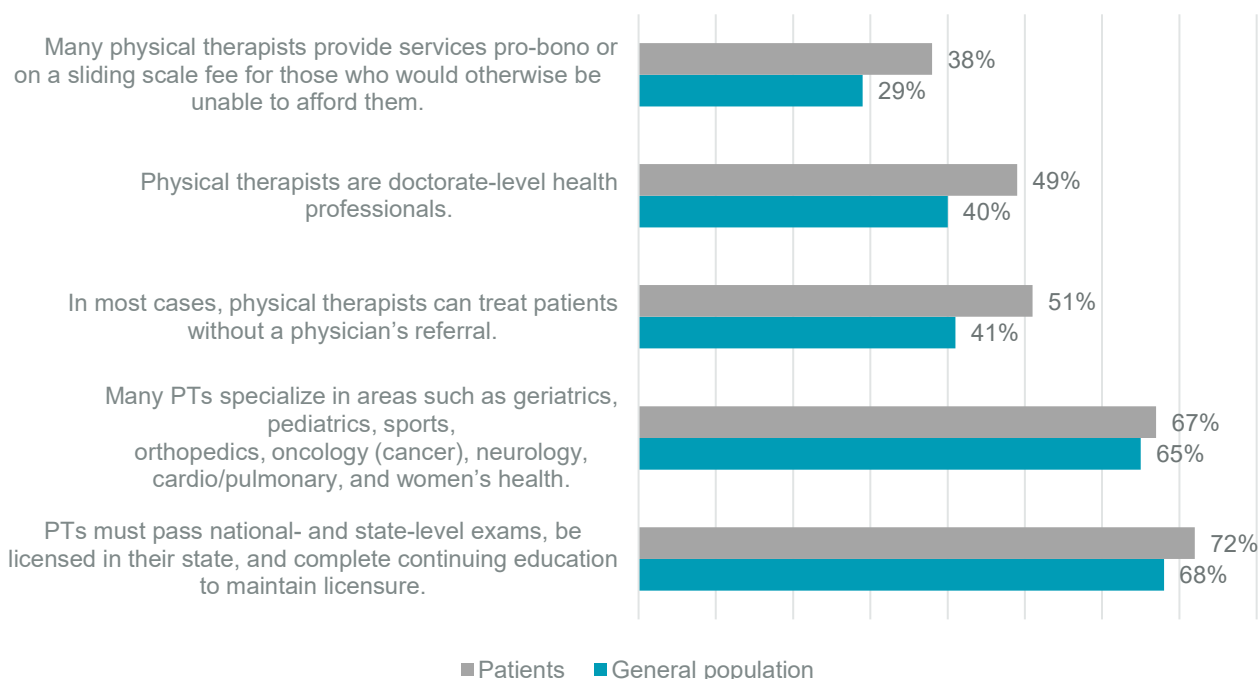
Specialization in physical therapy is gaining recognition, with 67% of patients and 65% of the general public aware that many PTs have advanced training or focus on areas like geriatrics, pediatrics, sports, neurology, oncology, orthopedics, pelvic health, and others.

Awareness of direct access is growing but *is* still limited. Only 41% of the general population knows that PTs can treat patients without a physician's referral. This number rises to 51% among patients. Meanwhile, the understanding of PTs' education level remains a gap, with just 40% of the general public aware that PTs are doctorate-level professionals. Among patients, nearly half (49%) know PTs are doctors of physical therapy.

Incorporating key findings from APTA's [State of Direct Access to Physical Therapist Services](#) report — such as its safety, efficacy, value, and convenience, alongside renewed efforts in consumer and patient education that emphasize PTs' advanced education and the benefits of seeing a PT without a referral — can help build greater public trust. Combined with highlighting PTs' doctorate-level education and the ability to see a PT directly without a physician's referral, public awareness efforts can encourage more consumers to choose physical therapy as a first-line solution for musculoskeletal pain and movement-related concerns.

Figure 9: Awareness of Physical Therapist Attributes

Q: Have you seen, read, or heard of the following statements? (Showing percent who responded "Yes, and I believe this.")



Americans increasingly recognize the value of physical therapy (Table 3). When presented with specific benefit statements, 62% or more of respondents across all groups affirmed their belief in them. This prompted awareness contrasts with Figure 10, which illustrates that clear, targeted messaging can significantly enhance public understanding of physical therapy's preventive benefits. These findings underscore the importance of ongoing, evidence-based public awareness campaigns that position physical therapy as a trusted solution for long-term health and wellness. Notably, awareness and confidence in physical therapy's role in treating male incontinence remain low, with only 37% of the general population familiar with it.

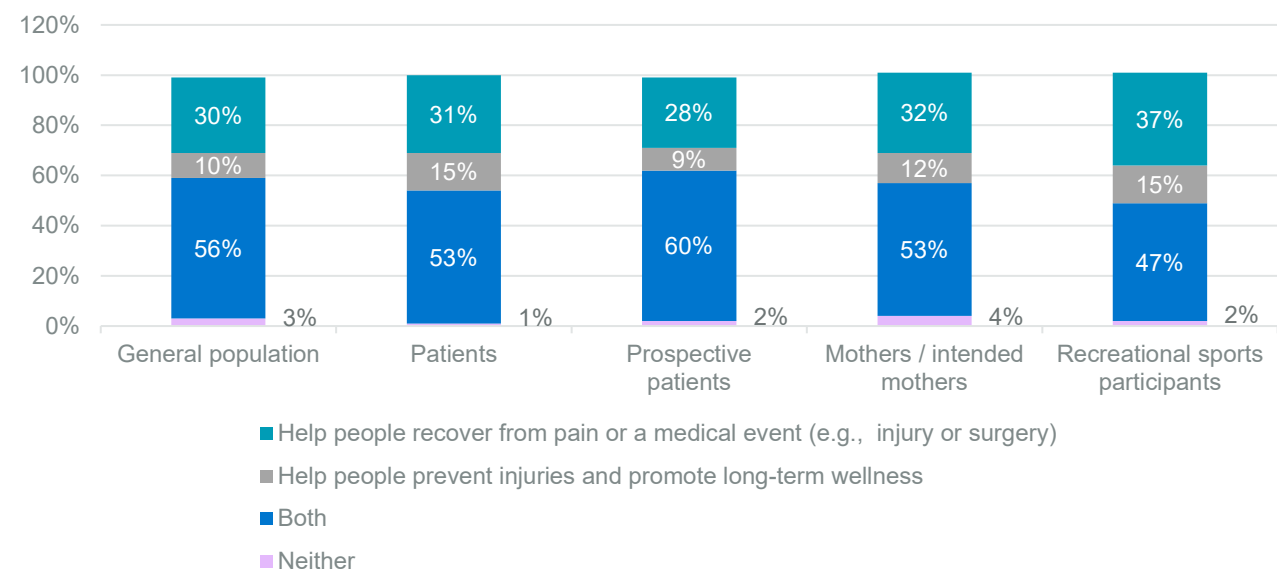
Table 3. Awareness of Physical Therapy's Full Range of Benefits

<i>Have you seen, read, or heard of the following statements about physical therapy?</i>	General population	Patients	Prospective patients	Mothers / intended mothers	Recreational sports participants
<i>(Showing % 'Yes, and I believe this')</i>	n=1,001	n=280	n=214	n=218	n=344
Physical therapy can help you move and exercise better to improve or maintain your heart health, regardless of age, fitness level, or medical status	74%	78%	78%	75%	73%
Physical therapy can help prevent injury to muscles, bones, and joints, thereby saving medical costs and downtime associated with avoidable surgery or hospital admissions	73%	74%	81%	69%	70%
Physical therapy can help you strengthen your core and pelvic floor muscles to prepare your body for pregnancy and birth and promote postpartum recovery	-	-	-	72%	-
Physical therapy utilizes advanced medical technology to promote full – and sometimes faster – injury recovery (versus only temporary relief)	67%	74%	72%	68%	69%
Physical therapy can provide an alternative to certain surgeries or pain management medications	67%	72%	71%	65%	69%
Physical therapy can help reduce fall risk	66%	69%	69%	62%	64%
Physical therapy promotes healthy and independent aging and longevity	65%	70%	72%	61%	67%
Physical therapy can complement other strategies of maintaining and improving mental and emotional health	63%	70%	70%	62%	63%
Physical therapy can address complications from conditions such as stroke, cancer, heart disease, and diabetes	63%	63%	67%	65%	63%
Physical therapy can help with incontinence after prostate surgery	37%	46%	44%	50%	47%

Rehabilitation still dominates perception of physical therapy (Figure 10). While over half of respondents recognize physical therapy’s dual role in prevention and recovery, a significant portion (more than 30%) still view physical therapy as only a recovery tool; few see it as a tool for proactive health strategy on its own. This indicates a gap in recognizing physical therapy’s potential to optimize health and shows that seeing a physical therapist is not yet a top-of-mind wellness concept, especially among recreational athletes.

Figure 10. Consumer Awareness of Physical Therapy's Role Beyond Rehabilitation

Q: Based on everything you know about physical therapy, what types of care can physical therapists provide?



Key Theme 3: Likelihood to Use Physical Therapy for Specific Needs Is High

Americans identify themselves as potential physical therapy users. Most Americans (91% of the general population and 95% of patients) see physical therapy as relevant to them. There is also a strong willingness to seek physical therapy when needed.

Across all groups, the likelihood to use physical therapy is high (Figure 11), especially for recovery (92%), injury prevention (89%), heart health (86%), neurological recovery (86%), and mobility or work-related needs (86%). Strong interest also exists for healthy aging (84%) and reducing medications or surgery (82%), showing support for physical therapy as a proactive health strategy. Likely use of physical therapy to support mental health strategies (79%) and pelvic floor dysfunction (66%) is lower but still strong among the general population, suggesting a need for targeted outreach. Intent is also high for maternal and pediatric needs like pregnancy preparation (80%), postpartum recovery (82%), and child developmental assessment (88%).

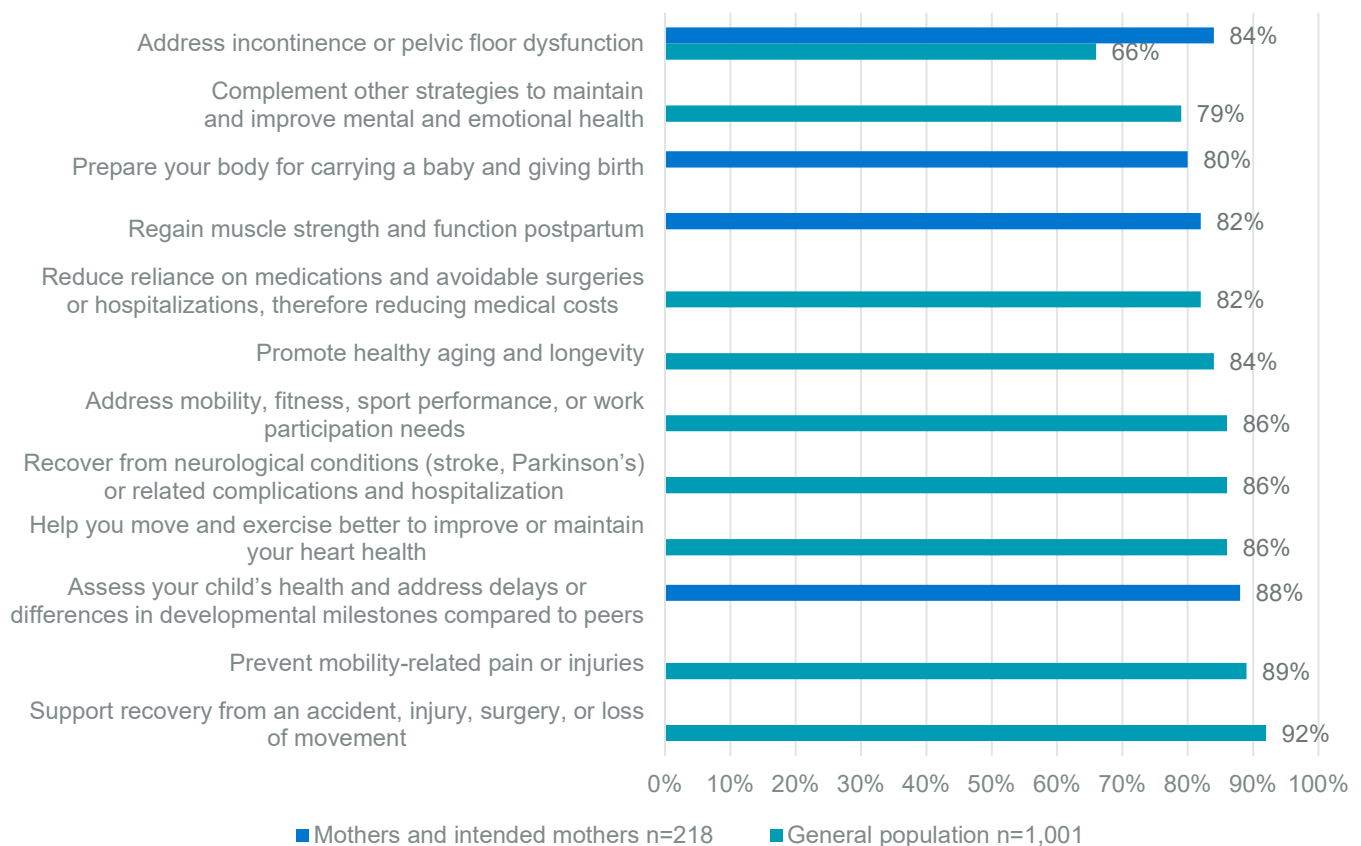
“Physical therapy can benefit someone like me.”

Showing % Strongly + Somewhat agree

- 1 **Patients** – 95%
- 2 **Mothers and intended mothers** – 93%
- 3 **Prospective patients** – 92%
- 4 **Recreational sports participants** – 92%
- 5 **General population** – 91%

Figure 11. Likelihood to Use Physical Therapy if Specific Health Needs Arise

Q: How likely would you be to see a physical therapist if you wanted or needed to for the following? (Showing percent somewhat likely and very likely.)



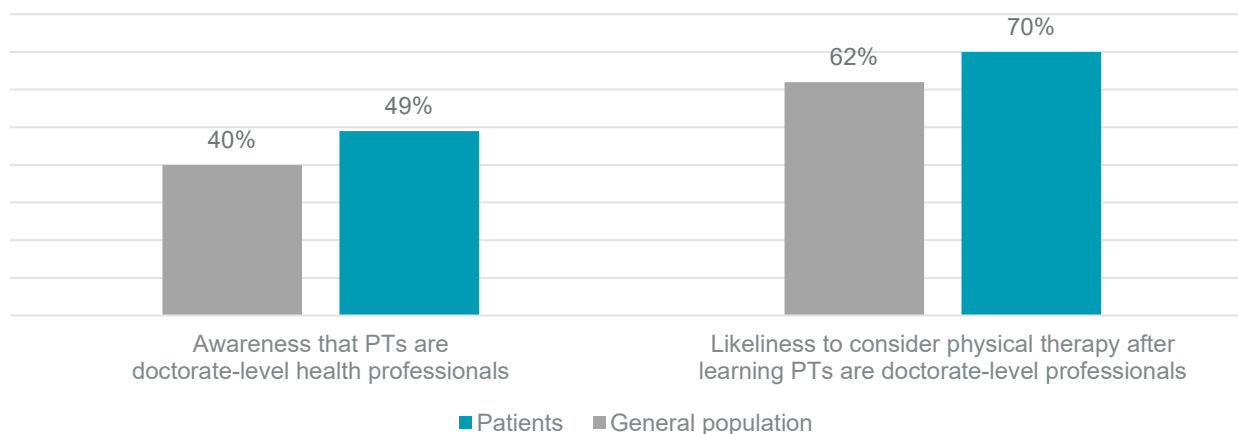
Challenges

Challenge 1: Awareness of Doctoral Education Is Low But Influential (Figure 12)

Although the first doctor of physical therapy degree was awarded in 1996 and the number of DPT graduates has steadily increased annually since then — with PTs entering the workforce since December 2018 holding a DPT — only 49% of patients and 40% of the general public know that PTs are doctorate-level professionals. Yet, when informed that PTs are doctorate-level professionals, 62% of the general population and 70% of patients say they would be more likely to see a PT. Figure 12 demonstrates a clear opportunity to boost public perception, increase trust, and promote earlier utilization through targeted awareness efforts emphasizing PTs' advanced education.

Figure 12. The Doctor of Physical Therapy Degree: Awareness vs. Potential Influence

(Comparing datapoints from two separate questions to illustrate awareness vs. influence.)



Challenge 2: Direct Access Is Not Yet Widely Known or Understood

Only 41% of the general population know PTs can treat patients without a physician's referral (from Figure 9 above). This number grows to 51% among those with prior physical therapy experience. APTA continues to promote direct access through ChoosePT.com and its public awareness campaigns.

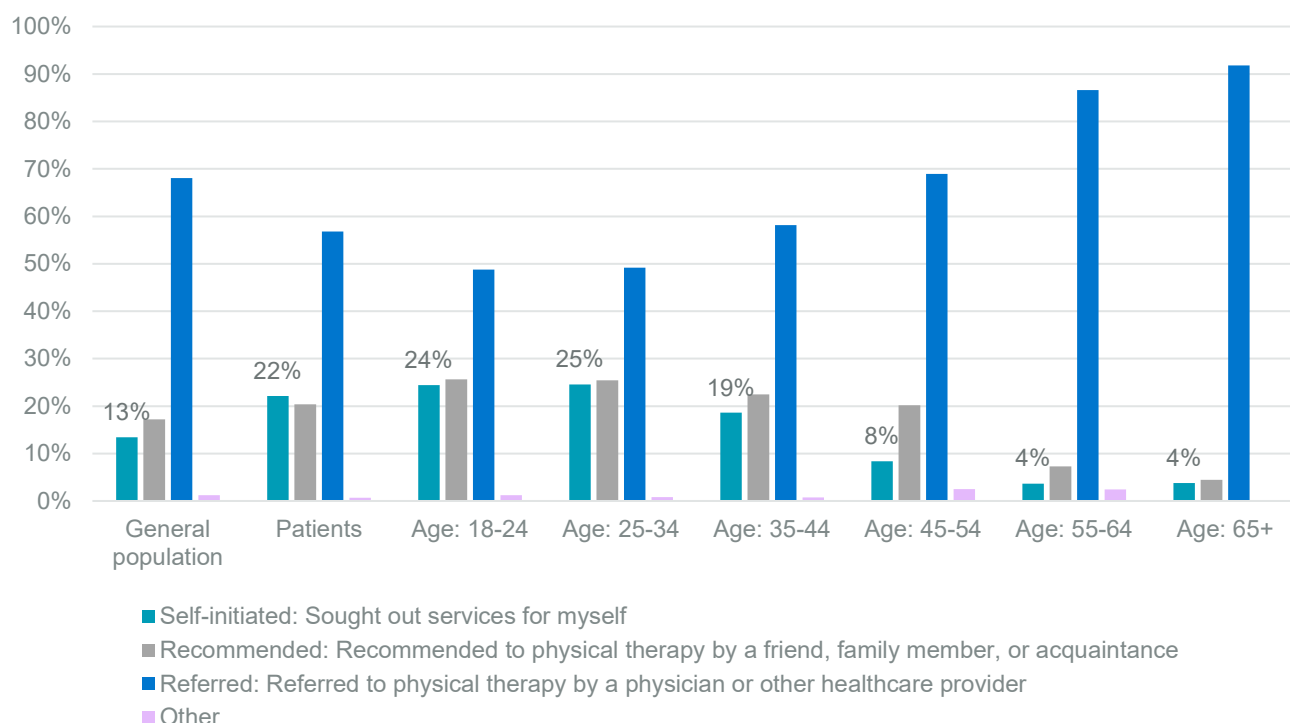
While not addressed in the 2025 survey, [APTA's 2022 Consumer Perceptions Report](#) revealed that many Americans still view physicians as gatekeepers for physical therapy referrals or desire to see them before going to physical therapy. Ongoing public awareness campaigns can help shift this mindset by educating the public that physical therapists are highly qualified to be the first point of care for neuromusculoskeletal and movement issues.

Physical therapy clinics can also play a key role in raising awareness by:

- Informing patients that they can see a PT without a physician's referral.
- Reassuring them that PTs collaborate with their other health care team members.
- Guiding them to additional care, including referrals when needed.
- Advising patients that earlier physical therapy intervention often leads to improved outcomes.

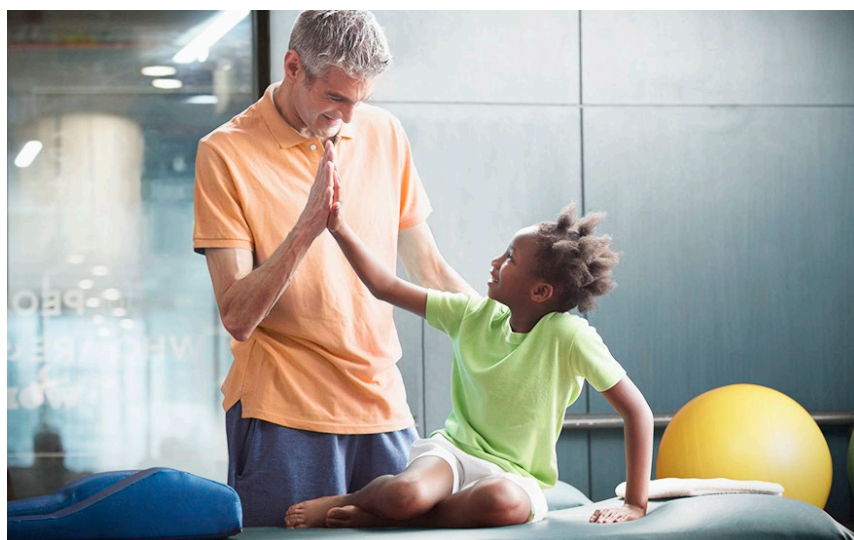
According to the 2025 survey, just 13% of the general population self-initiated physical therapist services, and 17% were recommended by a friend or family member (Figure 13).

Figure 13. How Americans Report Accessing Physical Therapist Services



Challenge 3: Americans Miss the Preventive Power of Physical Therapy

Americans prioritize mobility, independence, and quality of life, often relying on habits such as exercise, sleep, and mental stimulation as ways to stay healthy. Yet when asked what they're willing to do now to support their future well-being (Table 2), only 32% of the general public say they'd see a PT for a personalized assessment. That number rises significantly to 54% among patients familiar with physical therapy's benefits, highlighting the potential impact of awareness on a willingness to engage in proactive care.



Opportunities

Opportunity 1: Strengthen Consumer Confidence in Direct Access

Educating the public about direct access laws and the benefits of seeing a PT directly can empower earlier engagement, reduce treatment delays, lower downstream health care costs, and prevent worsening conditions. To address common concerns about bypassing a physician, it is essential to highlight key facts from this and previous consumer perception surveys, including:

- **Doctorate-level education:** Approximately two-thirds of Americans are more likely to see a PT when they learn PTs hold doctoral degrees, boosting confidence in their expertise and specialty knowledge.
- **Prevention and wellness:** Physical therapy supports aging well, one of America's top health priorities.
- **Safety and effectiveness:** Seeing a PT directly is safe, beneficial, and clinically effective.
- **Collaborative care:** PTs work closely with other health care providers to ensure coordinated, high-quality care.

Opportunity 2: Position Physical Therapy as a Valuable Tool for Prevention and Lifelong Mobility

The findings reveal a key opportunity to reposition physical therapy as a proactive, preventive resource for lifelong health and wellness, not just a reactive service for injury recovery. While Americans increasingly prioritize long-term health, many don't recognize when or how physical therapy fits into their health routine until prompted by a medical event.

To shift this perception, a strategic public awareness effort is needed to promote early engagement and routine check-ins with physical therapists as part of a well-rounded health regimen.

Key tactics should include:

- Sharing real-life testimonials from individuals who've benefited from preventive physical therapy across different life stages.
- Partnering with wellness influencers and community leaders to normalize physical therapy as part of a comprehensive approach to optimizing health and wellness.
- Targeting health-conscious audiences — especially those already aware of PT's benefits — through gyms, wellness events, and digital platforms to build trust.

By reframing physical therapy as a proactive choice (choosing physical therapy for a future benefit), we can help unlock its full potential to support long-term health and quality of life.



Opportunity 3: Bridge the Gap Between Awareness and Action

While many Americans say they'd see a physical therapist if a problem arises, only 32% would proactively seek a personalized evaluation for long-term wellness. Yet, **when informed about physical therapy's broader benefits** (from improving heart health and injury prevention to pregnancy support, healthy aging, falls-risk reduction, and mental well-being), nearly 75% say they'd be more likely to seek physical therapist services (Table 4). Likelihood to seek physical therapy for incontinence after prostate surgery is significantly lower compared to other groups.

This gap between awareness and action presents a powerful opportunity to motivate behavior change. A prevention-focused public awareness campaign can bridge this divide by:

- Clearly communicating the full value of physical therapy across life stages.
- Addressing common barriers such as misconceptions, lack of urgency, or access concerns.
- Offering actionable advice about when and how to include physical therapy in regular health routines.

Table 4. Awareness of Prevention Benefits Increases Likelihood to Use Physical Therapy

<i>For each of these statements about physical therapy, please indicate whether the statement makes you more or less likely to consider seeing a physical therapist. (Showing % Much more + Somewhat more likely)</i>	General population n=1,001	Patients n=280	Prospective patients n=214	Mothers / intended mothers n=218	Recreational sports participants n=344
Physical therapy can help you move and exercise better to improve or maintain heart health, regardless of age, fitness level, or medical status	77%	83%	83%	80%	80%
Physical therapy can help prevent injury to muscles, bones, and joints, thereby saving medical costs and downtime associated with avoidable surgery or hospital admissions	76%	84%	80%	78%	75%
Physical therapy can help you strengthen your core and pelvic floor muscles to prepare your body for pregnancy and birth and promote postpartum recovery	-	-	-	77%	-
Physical therapy can provide an alternative to certain surgeries or pain management medications	75%	80%	75%	75%	75%
Physical therapy utilizes advanced medical technology to promote full – and sometimes faster – injury recovery (versus only temporary relief)	72%	78%	77%	75%	72%
Physical therapy can address complications from conditions such as stroke, cancer, heart disease, and diabetes	71%	78%	73%	71%	74%
Physical therapy promotes healthy, independent aging and longevity	70%	76%	75%	72%	71%
Physical therapy can help reduce fall risk	70%	77%	75%	70%	69%
Physical therapy can complement other strategies of maintaining and improving mental and emotional health	69%	79%	75%	74%	71%
Physical therapy can help with incontinence after prostate surgery	46%	54%	51%	-	57%

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