

# Highlights From the APTA Guide to Physical Therapist Practice



The APTA Guide to Physical Therapist Practice is the American Physical Therapy Association’s seminal resource describing physical therapist practice and the foundations that practice is built on. These brief descriptions of the physical therapy profession and scope of practice of physical therapists, the value physical therapy brings to health care, and the common health conditions that can benefit from physical therapist evaluation and management are based on the principles of the Guide.

## Physical Therapy and Physical Therapists

Physical therapy is the practice of diagnosing, treating, and managing conditions via services provided by or under the direction of a physical therapist.

Physical therapists are licensed health professionals prepared through education, clinical training, and experience to diagnose and manage a variety of symptoms and conditions, with a focus on those that impact movement and function. They restore, maintain, and promote optimal physical function and the health and well-being of individuals and populations across the life span; manage and prevent disease and disability, and promote wellness, fitness, and health; and decrease the risk of preventable health conditions and adverse events.

Physical therapists have graduated from a professional, accredited education program. Those graduating since 2016 have earned doctoral degrees.

## Who Provides Physical Therapist Services?

Physical therapist services are always provided by a physical therapist, or with responsible utilization, direction, and supervision of a licensed physical therapist assistant when appropriate.

Individuals, families, and communities can access physical therapist services in two ways:

- Seeing a physical therapist directly without being referred by another provider, known as direct access.
- Getting a referral from another provider for physical therapist services.

A physical therapist should be a lifelong partner in managing physical and functional health.

“Demand for physical therapist services is expected to grow in the next decade with the aging of our population, increases in chronic diseases, expansion of conditions in which physical therapy is indicated, the role of the profession in prevention and wellness, and the long-term health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

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## Physical Therapists Improve Access and Add Value to Care

Physical therapists are a valuable first point of contact for many conditions and support primary care and emergency departments by screening for appropriateness of care, in consultation with other practitioners and in the direct care of patients.

Physical therapists contribute value in health care by providing early and direct access to high-quality care that identifies and treats presenting conditions before they intensify or result in further injury that may require more intensive and higher-cost services. Physical therapists assess for and mitigate risk to prevent injury and decrease overall health care costs. For example:

- **Delaying and/or avoiding surgery and injections.** [A 2022 study published in Jama Network Open](#) concluded that physical therapy was as good as surgery for treating a degenerative meniscal tear and should be the preferred treatment option.
- **Decreasing use of and reliance on opioids.** [A 2021 study published in Jama Network Open](#) concluded that patients who received physical therapy before and after a total knee replacement were less likely to experience long-term opioid use.
- **Decreasing length of hospital stay.** [A 2022 study published in Injury](#) showed that early initiation of physical therapy after geriatric hip fracture surgery is associated with shorter hospital stays and lower 30-day mortality.
- **Decreasing hospital readmissions.** [A 2021 study published in Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation](#) showed that for patients who have had a stroke, more rehabilitation while in acute care can lower the odds of hospital readmission and death after discharge. The effects are even greater for patients with comorbidities or lower mobility levels at the time of hospital admission.

“With the global increased incidence and impact of chronic diseases, the services of physical therapists in health and wellness are valuable and necessary components of person-centered care that also have the potential to significantly impact public health. Physical therapists possess the knowledge and skills to engage with individuals, groups, communities, and populations to decrease the onset, duration, severity, and sequelae of health conditions, particularly in populations with an identified condition, injury, or illness.”

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## Conditions That Physical Therapists Address

Physical therapists serve a variety of individual and population-based needs, such as:

- Education in self-management and health promotion.
- Screening to determine the need for primary care.
- Improving the outcomes of patients with chronic disease such as long COVID.
- Decreasing the effects of chronic pain on function.
- Minimizing the risk of falling.
- Easing the effect of arthritis on mobility.
- Managing and rehabilitating patients with neurologic conditions such as concussion.

Here are some examples of conditions and diagnoses — among many others — that physical therapists manage to improve function:

### Long COVID

Long COVID can affect people in a variety of ways. Some of the most common symptoms are fatigue, weakness, decreased lung function, increased heart rate, and brain fog. Physical therapist interventions have been shown to lead to improvements in all these conditions. ([IJC Heart & Vasculature, 2022](#))

### Chronic Pain

Physical therapy can prevent acute pain from becoming chronic pain. For those experiencing chronic pain, physical therapists provide nonpharmacologic interventions that can improve function. ([Health Services Research, 2018](#))

### Risk for Falls

Physical therapist interventions can decrease the risk of falls and of injuries associated with falling. Studies show that physical therapist-lead treatment such as exercise and patient education can reduce the likelihood of falling. ([JAMA, 2019](#); [APTA, 2020](#))

### Osteoarthritis

Those participating in physical therapy can improve symptoms and delay the need for surgery stemming from an arthritis diagnosis. ([JOSPT, 2018](#))

### Concussion

Physical therapists are important members of the concussion care management team, particularly in the areas of balance and vestibular evaluation and rehabilitation. ([Seminars in Pediatric Neurology, 2019](#))

## Learn More About Physical Therapy and Physical Therapists

[Access the APTA Guide to Physical Therapist Practice.](#)

[Visit the American Physical Therapy Association website.](#)

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