

# Physical Therapist

- **Outlook for Physical Therapists**
  - The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that employment opportunities for physical therapists will grow 36 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average of all occupations. The overall demand is expected to stem from the increase in physical therapy services for aging baby boomers. The aging population is more likely to suffer from heart attacks, strokes and injuries affecting mobility, all of which can require physical therapy as part of rehabilitation. More cases of patients with chronic conditions such as obesity and asthma are also expected, and physical therapists will be needed to help patients maintain their mobility.
  - Major advances in medical technology will also likely play a role in the increased need for PTs, as survival rates increase for trauma victims and newborns with birth defects. These patients will require rehabilitative care to recover from surgeries. The Affordable Care Act may also increase the number of individuals with access to physical therapy services.
  
- **Steps to Becoming a Physical Therapist**
  - **Earn a Bachelor's Degree in a Health-Related Field**
    - Before enrolling in a doctoral degree program for physical therapy, you must meet certain prerequisites. This normally includes completing a bachelor's degree program with a heavy dose of the following courses:
      - Anatomy
      - Physiology
      - Biology
      - Chemistry
      - Physics
  - **Complete a Doctor of Physical Therapy Degree Program**
    - In order to work as a physical therapist, you must complete a Doctor of Physical Therapy degree program. As of 2014, there were 228 physical therapy programs accredited by the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE), most of which last three years.
    - It is usually necessary to apply for DPT programs through the Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service (PTCAS). Students in DPT programs must complete a clinical internship in an area such as acute or orthopedic care with supervised experience.
    - DPT programs involve coursework in the following subjects:

- Applied Physical Therapy
- Functional Anatomy
- Complex Conditions
- Life Span Development
- Pharmacotherapy
- **Meet Your State's Licensing Requirements**
  - All states require PTs to become licensed. Licensing requirements are set by individual states, but include passing the National Physical Therapy Examination (NPTE), which is administered by the Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy (FSBPT). The NPTE is a computerized, multiple-choice exam. Applicants may take the exam three times in a twelve-month period. The Practice Exam and Assessment Tool (PEAT), also developed by the FSBPT, allows applicants to practice taking the test using an exam that resembles the NPTE.
  - Other licensing requirements may include a law exam and a criminal background check. Most renewal programs require the completion of continuing education credits. Make sure to check with your state board for specific licensing requirements.
- **Complete a Residency (Optional)**
  - After earning a DPT degree, you can apply to a clinical residency program for additional training and experience in specialty areas of care. These programs typically last one year. You can then specialize further by completing a fellowship in an advanced clinical area.
- **Obtain Board Certification (Optional)**
  - After working in the field, physical therapists may apply to become a board-certified specialist in one of eight clinical specialty areas offered by the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties. In order to become board-certified, physical therapists must complete at least 2,000 hours of clinical work or an APTA-accredited residency program in the specialty area, and pass an exam.
- **Physical Therapy Degrees and Curriculum**
  - Students who want to pursue a career as a physical therapist have several degree options to help them train for this career. Although physical therapy degrees are only available at the doctoral level, students can get the prerequisite education for these programs or train to be a physical therapy assistant by earning an associate or bachelor's degree. Many schools, for example, offer a bachelor's degree in pre-physical therapy, which is used as the foundation for advanced study. Few online options exist for these undergraduate degrees, but the possibilities increase when students reach the doctoral level. According to the American Physical Therapy Association, master's programs are no longer offered.

- Below are examples of how each level of degree can help students meet their educational and personal goals, and ultimately move into this rewarding career path.
  - **Associate Degrees**
    - In an associate degree program, students gain the knowledge and skills they need to assist physical therapists as they work on patients. Students learn the fundamentals of the profession through both classroom instruction and practical training with a licensed physical therapist. The following are samples of courses offered in a PTA associate degree program.
    - **Physical therapist assistant procedures**
    - This course introduces students to how the clinical environment works and the primary duties performed by physical therapy assistants.
    - PTA Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Taking a patient's vital signs
      - Administering the Heimlich maneuver
      - Mastery of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)
    - **Clinical kinesiology**
    - This class explores the musculoskeletal and nervous systems of the body and how they work.
      - PTA Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Ability to recognize a normal and abnormal patient gait
      - Proper muscle testing
      - Measuring joints
    - **Therapeutic exercise**
    - This course explores types of therapeutic exercises and how they can be applied to different medical conditions
      - PTA Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Developing exercise programs for a variety of medical conditions
      - Keeping patients safe during therapeutic exercises
      - Evaluating patients' progress as they work through an exercise program
    - **Assistive devices**
    - This class familiarizes students with the types of assistive devices on the market and how they are used.
      - PTA Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Choosing the right wheelchair for a patient
      - Understanding how patients use assistive devices such as walkers, crutches, and canes
  - **Bachelor's Degrees**

- Students in a pre-physical therapy bachelor's program get a comprehensive overview of the physical therapy field and take courses in subjects that lay the foundation for a doctoral degree. For instance, students learn how to perform the duties of a physical therapist, while also taking science classes--such as biology and physiology--which educate them about the workings of the human body. The following are some examples of the coursework that students in pre-physical therapy bachelor's degrees may expect to take:
  - **Health science statistics**
    - This class teaches the statistical methodologies that are used in the health care field.
      - PT Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Analyzing patient data through different statistical methods
      - Understanding of statistical methods such as correlation, inferential statistics, and analysis of variance
  - **Athletic injuries**
    - Students in this class learn about the different kinds of athletic injuries that patients may suffer from, what causes them, and how they are treated.
      - PT Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Diagnosing athletic trauma
      - Creating and implementing preventive plans for patients at risk of injury
      - Ability to apply sports medicine principles
  - **Pharmacology**
    - This class familiarizes students with the types of drugs used by physical therapists.
      - PT Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Knowing which drugs are appropriate for different conditions
      - Recognizing drug abuse issues
      - Understanding the physical and psychological effects of different drugs
  - **Health psychology**
    - Students learn how to treat patients from a biopsychological perspective.
      - PT Skills & Knowledge Gained
      - Understanding how pain affects a patient's psychological state
      - Making nutritional recommendations that alleviate pain and stress
      - Ability to recognize mental health issues

- **Doctoral Degrees**

- Typically, master's degrees in physical therapy are not available. Instead, students can enroll directly in physical therapy Ph.D. programs if they have earned a pre-physical therapy bachelor's degree or have worked as a physical therapy assistant--or a related health care position--and want to transition into a physical therapist job. These degrees, which can take up to six years to complete, can be earned at a traditional college, as well as online or hybrid learning environments. The following are crucial skills that students gain from completing a physical therapy doctorate:

- **Theoretical understanding**

- Physical therapy is an academically rigorous field, requiring practitioners to understand the complex systems of the human body, how they work, and how they can be rejuvenated after an injury. Students in Ph.D. programs gain extensive knowledge on the physical and emotional effects of injuries and how such factors influence treatment in order to develop the most effective recovery plan for each individual patient.

- Clinical experience

- It's imperative for physical therapists to actually experience how evidence-based theories can be applied to the real world. As a result, many classes allow students to observe how patients are treated in a clinical setting and get hands-on experience.

- Critical thinking

- There is a vast amount of health care information available, and physical therapists need to evaluate it with a discerning eye. Students learn how to critically evaluate industry research and make assessments about its validity and practical application.

- Clinical decision-making

- The decisions made by physical therapists greatly impact how well a patient recovers from an accident or injury. During their doctoral studies, physical therapists develop decision-making skills that draw on evidence-based research, advice from other practitioners, and their own past experience.

- **Online Physical Therapy Schools**

- Finding a list of online physical therapy schools is just the beginning when it comes to choosing the right distance degree program. Students should thoroughly investigate each school to ensure it offers the coursework and training they need

to achieve their career goals. The following are some considerations to keep in mind before enrolling in a program.

- Goals
  - Students should consider what they want out of their careers and carefully review all aspects of an online physical therapy school to determine whether it will help them achieve those goals. Because the field is so broad, students should consider what patient population and injuries they would like to work with, and find a program that has highly regarded curriculum and faculty in that area. For example, students who want to work on patients suffering from heart problems should find a program that has a strong cardiovascular curriculum.
- Research Opportunities
  - Students who want to contribute to the field by conducting research should choose a physical therapy school that gives them the opportunity to participate in such projects. Schools with a strong research emphasis may offer students valuable opportunities to work on studies that are up for publication in professional journals or will be presented to industry peers at conferences hosted by key organizations such as the American Physical Therapy Association. Students should also think about the specific area of the field they want to research-whether it is geriatrics, pediatrics, neurology, or orthopedics-and find a school that has research opportunities in those specific areas.
- Accreditation
  - No matter what direction students want to take with their education or their careers, they should make sure the school they choose is accredited. Physical therapy schools accredited by the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education (CAPTE) have been vetted to ensure they meet the highest educational standards. This is particularly important for online learners. Accreditation ensures that students receive a quality education and are learning PT best practices, so they can enter the professional world with the proper knowledge and skills.
- **Components of a Successful Career**
  - as a Physical Therapist
  - Physical Therapy Skills
    - Physical therapists must master a host of different skills to perform their responsibilities effectively. Strong observational skills help them diagnose patient problems and, evaluate treatments. Because much of the job involves standing up while providing manual therapy and therapeutic exercises, dexterity and physical stamina are important as well. Finally, physical therapists spend a lot of individual time with their patients, and should be able to empathize with them. Effective communication skills

will help them explain treatment programs and motivate patients to work at exercises that may be difficult and painful.

- Physical Therapy Credentials
  - Step up. Physical therapists ask it of their patients, and they can do it as well. While not mandatory, many physical therapists opt to earn a certification from the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA). These certifications allow them to highlight their expertise in a specific area of the field, and help them stand out from other candidates when they're looking for employment.
- APTA certifications can be earned in the following areas:
  - Cardiovascular and Pulmonary
  - Clinical Electrophysiology
  - Geriatrics
  - Neurology
  - Orthopedics
  - Pediatrics
  - Sports
  - Women's Health
  
- **Tools and Technology for Physical Therapists**
  - To complement their knowledge of the human body and how to treat motion-related injuries, physical therapists use an array of tools and technologies in their work. For example, balance beams and boards are designed to help patients regain their balance by working specific muscle groups and developing reflexes; specially designed hammers test tendon and nerve reflexes; and adjustable work tables provide a comfortable and effective space for stretching and other exercises. In addition, these professionals use different kinds of technology to do their work, such as medical software programs (e.g., Clinicient Insight, TheraWriter.PT, and Physical Therapy Advantage) that are specifically designed to help physical therapists with administrative tasks.