



Ask the Physical Therapist – Part 1

What is a physical therapist?

A physical therapist is a state-licensed health care provider who is required to have a minimum of a master's degree from an accredited university, and pass the national physical therapy board exam in order to practice.

The main focus of a physical therapist is to evaluate and treat individuals with loss of physical function with or without pain.

How do I know if I need the services of a physical therapist?

If you have suffered any type of injury that has affected your ability to physically function without pain, or following orthopedic surgery to speed recovery, or chronic aches and pains that seem to never go away.

There are several conditions a physical therapist is trained to manage. It is best to locate your closest physical therapy office and ask them if you can schedule a consultation to see if your specific condition is appropriate for these services.

Do I need to see my primary care physician before receiving treatment from a physical therapist?

In most cases, your insurance carrier will require a doctor's prescription in order for physical therapy services to be a covered benefit.

However, in the state of Pennsylvania, you are able to seek "direct access" to your local physical therapy office for a specified amount of visits before a doctor's prescription would be required.

Does physical therapy treatment have to hurt?

Physical therapy treatment is a combination of non-invasive interventions that may include but are not limited to soft tissue mobilization techniques, muscle stretching, specific strengthening exercises, heat or ice, ultrasound and electrical stimulation to relax injured tissue, patient education, neurological retraining, balance training and rehabilitation of regular daily activities.

Your treatment plans will be designed around what you need to address the specific injury and limitations you are currently experiencing. Physical therapy is a cooperative process between the patient and the therapist. You should communicate your needs to your physical therapist and design a plan that you both are comfortable with. Remember, the treatment you receive will be specialized to your needs.



Ask the Physical Therapist – Part 2

I have been told I have arthritis, is there anything I can do about it?

You must first determine what kind of arthritis you have. There are two primary categories of arthritis. Osteoarthritis (OA), and Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a form of arthritis that is a result of excessive physical wear and tear of the joint surfaces. This is most commonly found in weight bearing joints like the spine, hip and knee. This excessive wear and tear is usually found in one or two joints. Most patients will complain of pain as their initial symptom. These symptoms are made worse by activity and relieved by rest. In some cases a moderate to severe physical trauma to a joint can result in OA.

What can contribute to the severity of my osteoarthritis (OA)?

Obesity contributes to the amount of pressure that is transmitted throughout your weight bearing joints. The more you weigh, the more pressure is produced.

Lack of muscle flexibility and strength. These deficits contribute to OA by the effect they have on joint alignment. You want as much surface area of the joint as possible to match up. When the surface area is decreased, due to poor alignment, the pressure per square inch inside the joint will increase dramatically. The result is a mechanically deficient joint which is now predisposed to excessive wear and tear.

How can physical therapy help OA?

Physical therapy can help by improving strength and flexibility in the affected joints of your body. This will help your body maximize the remaining force absorbing structures (i.e muscle and tendon) of the arthritic joint. Physical therapy cannot replace the damaged surfaces of the joint, but can minimize the affect this damage has on your function. There will be some cases of osteoarthritis that are too severe for physical therapy to help, and a surgical consultation may be necessary.

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) is the second type of arthritis and is related to a disease process. More specifically your body develops an autoimmune response to the smooth cartilage and inner lining of each affected joint. This means that your body is recognizing the inner parts of your joint as foreign, and tries to destroy them. Unlike OA, it is commonly seen in several joints of the body and in non-weight bearing areas. This type of arthritis can be found in hands, feet, wrists, and elbows. In addition, the person with RA may be experiencing unexplained fatigue as part of their symptoms.



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How can physical therapy help RA?

Physical therapy is best utilized once the acute inflammation of the joints is under control. Once this is achieved through the use of anti-inflammatory medication prescribed by your physician, the physical therapist can design exercises to maximize joint range of motion and prevent the affected joints from “freezing” up. In more severe cases a splint will be created to reduce inflammation and relieve symptoms.

I like to use the analogy of “your joints are like the tires on you car”. The difference is you only get one set of joints. If you let them wear down they are not easily replaced. Take care of them now, and you can certainly increase the life of your joints. If you have any questions about your specific condition it is best to consult your local health care practitioner. Don’t just live with joint pain because you think nothing can be done.