

The Physical Therapy Prescription



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KEYWORDS

• Physical therapy • Visit • Prescription • Indications

KEY POINTS

- Physical therapists are licensed health care professionals who maintain, restore, and improve movement, activity, and health, enabling individuals of all ages to have optimal functioning and quality of life.
- The advent of evidence-based medicine over the past 30 years allows patients to benefit from interventions that are scientifically sound and, when appropriately provided, produce cost-effective outcomes.
- Patient entrance into physical therapy in most cases starts with a referral from a health care provider. In musculoskeletal medicine common referrals include pain, weakness, and instability leading to loss of motion, strength, and function.
- The physical therapy referral should include the diagnosis, frequency, and duration of therapy services in addition to any precautions or protocol considerations.
- After a comprehensive musculoskeletal evaluation, the physical therapist will structure a clinical and home treatment program, allowing patients to overcome physical limitations and maximize function.

INTRODUCTION TO PHYSICAL THERAPY

The history of physical therapy can be traced to Ancient Greek culture and the use of massage and hydrotherapy by Hippocrates.¹ Physical therapy as a profession dates to 1894, when 4 nurses in England formed the Society of Trained Masseuses, later to become known as the Chartered Society for Physiotherapy.² In the United States “reconstruction aides” were educated at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC in an effort to help manage the injuries suffered by soldiers in World War I.³

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By 1921 the first physical therapy research articles were published in *The PT Review*. The Physical Therapy Association was founded later to become known as the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA). The APTA is still in existence today, and is the governing body of physical therapy in the United States. The APTA sets educational standards, and oversees the 213 institutions offering physical therapy education programs and the 309 institutions offering physical therapy assistant education programs to students across the United States.¹

In the 1940s wounded World War II veterans and the outbreak of poliomyelitis (polio) marked an increase in the need for physical therapists and their services. Practice in the 1950s continued to be influenced by the Korean War.⁴ The development of the Salk vaccine brought an end to the polio epidemic, and by the early 1960s the profession began to focus on other disabilities. The 1960s saw the development of neurologic techniques for treatment of patients with stroke, cerebral palsy, and other disorders of the central nervous system.³ The cardiopulmonary area of physical therapy also developed with the advancement of open heart surgery.³ Development of total joint replacements in the 1960s created an additional need for postoperative physical therapy.³ The period of time between 1950 and 2000 gave rise to technological advances in modalities and methodology, allowing physical therapists to expand practice and the types of diseases and conditions that they could positively influence.¹

For the last 100 years, physical therapy education has evolved from early training programs for reconstruction aids to its current status as the doctor of physical therapy (DPT) degree.¹ After graduation, candidates must pass a licensure examination. Licensure is managed by individual states. Physical therapists then become licensed health care professionals who maintain, restore, and improve movement, in addition to overall activity levels, thus enabling individuals of all ages to strive toward optimal functioning and quality of life.¹

By way of a significant push to expanding physical therapy toward evidence-based practice, patients benefit from interventions that are scientifically sound and, when appropriately provided, produce cost-effective outcomes.¹ Within the profession of physical therapy, specializations have been developed to better serve patients (Box 1).

Reimbursement of physical therapy services from Medicare and third-party payers has traditionally, and in most cases still requires, a referral from a health care provider. The professional training and expertise that characterize physical therapists has been recognized by 48 states and the District of Columbia. These states have removed provisions requiring a referral by a health care provider for physical therapy evaluation and

Box 1

Physical therapy specializations

Cardiovascular and pulmonary

Clinical electrophysiology

Geriatrics

Neurology

Orthopedics

Pediatrics

Sports

Women’s health

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