

## CAREERS IN PHYSICAL THERAPY

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### **What do Physical Therapists do?**

The physical therapist works under the direction of a physician to rehabilitate people with injuries or diseases of muscle, joint, nerve, or bone. The treatments given by a physical therapist include exercises for increasing strength, endurance, coordination, and range of motion; and the use of heat, cold, electricity, sound, and water to relieve pain and stimulate motor activity. In addition, emphasis is placed on preparing patients psychologically for treatment. Other responsibilities of the physical therapist may include teaching, research, or supervision of supportive personnel.

The practice of physical therapists on the professional level is regulated by state law in the United States. To practice, one must have either a bachelor's or a master's degree from an accredited program and must pass a state licensing examination. After January 2002 bachelor degree programs were no longer accredited.

### **Employment Characteristics**

About three-fourths of all physical therapists are employed in hospitals and nursing homes. The rest work in schools for handicapped children, private offices, rehabilitation centers, community health centers and research centers, college athletic departments, and government agencies. The kind of facility in which a physical therapist works is often determined by his or her practice specialty. Some physical therapists specialize in community health, orthopedics, pediatrics, sports medicine, neurology, oncology, geriatrics, or pulmonary physical therapy.

Opportunities for diversity of experiences and clients vary according to the population, size, and location of a community and its facilities, but a resourceful physical therapist can develop a practice in almost any setting. Salaries vary depending upon level of responsibility, experience, and geographical location. Median annual earnings of physical therapists were \$57,330 in 2002.

### **The Future of Physical Therapy**

According to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos080.htm>) this occupation is expected to grow faster than the average through 2012.

### **Physical Therapy Education**

#### **Undergraduate Preparation**

The educational program is similar to the premedical curriculum, with a strong emphasis on physical and biological sciences. No specific undergraduate major is required, but the majority of physical therapy students are science majors, with the largest of these being biology majors. Students who already hold a bachelor's degree in a field other than physical therapy should complete an entry-level master's degree program in physical therapy.

There are several accredited physical therapy schools offering a master's degree program, which typically entails one to two years of study. Although all entry level professional programs must meet the same accreditation standards, each has a slightly different academic and clinical curriculum and various areas of concentration.

The physical therapy curriculum includes courses in anatomy, physiology, neuroanatomy, neurophysiology, the biomechanics of motion, and human growth and development. Students also spend time in a clinic and administer physical therapy under supervision.

**Resources and Advising**

Resources such as the following may be found in the Cornell Career Services Career Library, 103 Barnes Hall: *Physical Therapy Health Notebook* • *Directory of Physical Therapy Education Programs* • *Opportunities in Physical Therapy Careers*

Website of interest:

[Cornell Career Services Resources for Exploring Health Careers](http://www.career.cornell.edu/HealthCareers/occupationalResourceGuide.html)- physical therapy:  
<http://www.career.cornell.edu/HealthCareers/occupationalResourceGuide.html>