What Is a Physical Therapist?

Physical therapists are experts in the examination and treatment of musculoskeletal and neuromuscular problems that affect people's abilities to move and function. They work with patients or clients in hospitals (even critically ill patients in the intensive care unit), in nursing homes, in outpatient clinics, in the home, in schools, and on the job.

What They Do

Physical therapists help people with orthopedic problems, such as low back pain or knee surgeries, to reduce pain and regain function. They assist people who are recovering from a stroke and learning to use their limbs and walk again. Physical therapists also direct exercise programs for **preventing** injury and loss of movement.

Education

All physical therapists are college graduates and are required to take a national examination and be licensed by the state in which they practice.

Common Problems Treated with Physical Therapy

- Arthritis
- Low back pain
- Knee, ankle, or foot problems
- Neck pain
- Carpal tunnel syndrome
- Shoulder, arm, wrist, or hand problems
- Sprains and muscle strains
- Rehabilitation after a serious injury or prolonged hospitalization
- Cardiac rehabilitation
- Stroke rehabilitation
- Chronic respiratory problems (COPD)
- Problems with balance, falls
- Incontinence
- Fitness and wellness education
- Hip fractures

Types of Treatment   Types of treatment used by physical therapists include:

- Therapeutic exercise

- "Mobilization" or "manipulation" of joints (that is, perform certain types of movements at the end of your range of motion)

- Massages to promote proper movement and function

- Ultrasound (which uses high frequency waves to produce heat)

- Hot packs or hot paraffin treatments

- Ice treatments

Insurance Coverage   Most forms of physical therapy treatment are covered by your insurance, but the coverage will vary with each plan.