

Physical Therapist Assistants and Aides

(0*NET 31-2021.00, 31-2022.00)

Significant Points

- Employment in the occupation is projected to increase much faster than the average, reflecting the growing number of individuals with disabilities or limited function and the increasing use of physical therapist assistants to reduce the cost of therapeutic services.
- Physical therapist assistants generally have an associate degree, but physical therapist aides usually learn skills on the job.
- Almost three-fourths of all jobs were in hospitals or offices of physical therapists.

Nature of the Work

Physical therapist assistants and aides perform components of physical therapy procedures and related tasks selected by a supervising physical therapist. These workers assist physical therapists in providing services that help improve mobility, relieve pain, and prevent or limit permanent physical disabilities of patients suffering from injuries or disease. Patients include accident victims and individuals with disabling conditions such as low-back pain, arthritis, heart disease, fractures, head injuries, and cerebral palsy.

Physical therapist assistants perform a variety of tasks. Components of treatment procedures performed by these workers, under the direction and supervision of physical therapists, involve exercises, massages, electrical stimulation, paraffin baths, hot and cold packs, traction, and ultrasound. Physical therapist assistants record the patient's responses to treatment and report the outcome of each treatment to the physical therapist.

Physical therapist aides help make therapy sessions productive, under the direct supervision of a physical therapist or physical therapist assistant. They usually are responsible for keeping the treatment area clean and organized and for preparing for each patient's therapy. When patients need assistance moving to or from a treatment area, aides push them in a wheelchair or provide them with a shoulder to lean on. Because they are not licensed, aides do not perform the clinical tasks of a physical therapist assistant.

The duties of aides include some clerical tasks, such as ordering depleted supplies, answering the phone, and filling out insurance forms and other paperwork. The extent to which an aide or an assistant performs clerical tasks depends on the size and location of the facility.

Working Conditions

The hours and days that physical therapist assistants and aides work vary with the facility and with whether they are full- or part-time employees. Many outpatient physical therapy offices and clinics have evening and weekend hours, to help coincide with patients' personal schedules.

Physical therapist assistants and aides need a moderate degree of strength because of the physical exertion required in assisting patients with their treatment. In some cases, assistants and aides need to lift patients. Constant kneeling, stooping, and standing for long periods also are part of the job.

Employment

Physical therapist assistants and aides held about 87,000 jobs in 2002. Physical therapist assistants held about 50,000 jobs, physical therapist aides approximately 37,000. Both work alongside physical therapists in a variety of settings. Almost three-fourths of all jobs were in hospitals or in offices of other health practitioners (which includes offices of physical therapists). Others worked primarily in nursing care facilities, offices of physicians, home healthcare services, and outpatient care centers.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Physical therapist aides are trained on the job, but physical therapist assistants typically earn an associate degree from an accredited physical therapist assistant program. Not all States require licensure or registration in order for the physical therapist assistant to practice. The States that require licensure stipulate specific educational and examination criteria. Complete information on practice acts and regulations can be obtained from the State licensing boards. Additional requirements may include certification in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and other first aid and a minimum number of hours of clinical experience.

According to the American Physical Therapy Association, there were 245 accredited physical therapist assistant programs in the United States as of 2003. Accredited physical therapist assistant programs are designed to last 2 years, or 4 semesters, and culminate in an associate degree. Programs are divided into academic study and hands-on clinical experience. Academic course work includes algebra, anatomy and physiology, biology, chemistry, and psychology. Many programs require that students complete a semester of anatomy and physiology and have certifications in CPR and other first aid even before they begin their clinical field experience. Both educators and prospective employers view clinical experience as integral to ensuring that students understand the responsibilities of a physical therapist assistant.

Employers typically require physical therapist aides to have a high school diploma, strong interpersonal skills, and a desire to assist people in need. Most employers provide clinical on-the-job training.



Physical therapist assistants and aides perform physical therapy procedures and related tasks.

Job Outlook

Employment of physical therapist assistants and aides is expected to grow much faster than the average through the year 2012. The impact of proposed Federal legislation imposing limits on reimbursement for therapy services may adversely affect the short-term job outlook for physical therapist assistants and aides. However, over the long run, demand for physical therapist assistants and aides will continue to rise, in accordance with growth in the number of individuals with disabilities or limited function. The growing elderly population is particularly vulnerable to chronic and debilitating conditions that require therapeutic services. These patients often need additional assistance in their treatment, making the roles of assistants and aides vital. The large baby-boom generation is entering the prime age for heart attacks and strokes, further increasing the demand for cardiac and physical rehabilitation. In addition, future medical developments should permit an increased percentage of trauma victims to survive, creating added demand for therapy services.

Physical therapists are expected to increasingly utilize assistants to reduce the cost of physical therapy services. Once a patient is evaluated and a treatment plan is designed by the physical therapist, the physical therapist assistant can provide many aspects of treatment, as prescribed by the therapist.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of physical therapist assistants were \$36,080 in 2000. The middle 50 percent earned between \$30,260 and \$42,780. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$23,530, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$48,910. Median annual earnings of physical therapist assistants in 2002 were \$35,870 in general medical and surgical hospitals and \$35,750 in offices of other health practitioners.

Median annual earnings of physical therapist aides were \$20,670 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$17,430 and \$24,560. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$15,290, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$29,990. Median annual earnings of physical therapist aides in 2002 were \$20,690 in general medical and surgical hospitals and \$19,840 in offices of other health practitioners.

Related Occupations

Physical therapist assistants and aides work under the supervision of physical therapists. Other workers in the healthcare field who work under similar supervision include dental assistants, medical assistants, occupational therapist assistants and aides, pharmacy aides, and pharmacy technicians.

Sources of Additional Information

Career information on physical therapist assistants and a list of schools offering accredited programs can be obtained from:

► The American Physical Therapy Association, 1111 North Fairfax St., Alexandria, VA 22314-1488. Internet: <http://www.apta.org>