



COLLEGE OF  
PHYSICAL  
THERAPISTS  
OF ALBERTA

communication

## What is Physiotherapy?

Physiotherapy is a primary care, autonomous, client-focused health profession dedicated to:

- Improving and maintaining functional independence and physical performance,
- Preventing and managing pain, physical impairments, disabilities and limits to participation; and
- Promoting fitness, health and wellness.

Physiotherapy's unique contribution to health care stems from its advanced understanding of how the body moves, what keeps it from moving well and how to restore mobility.

## What do Physiotherapists do?

Physiotherapists assess the client's level of mobility, strength, endurance and other physical abilities to determine the impact of their illness or injury on their physical function, whether at work, rest or play. They diagnose the condition and develop a treatment plan to restore movement and reduce pain or limitations to mobility. They treat the condition and help the client understand its effect on their function. They measure the client's progress regularly and adjust the treatment accordingly. They also advise the client on how to manage their condition independently and help the client prevent avoidable recurrences or complications. *Physiotherapists can also advise you on ways to prevent potential health problems from occurring before they arise.*

Physiotherapists provide valuable health care for people across the life span from birth to older age. Primarily, they work in 3 practice areas: orthopaedics, neurology and cardiorespiratory. The following are examples of the types of conditions physiotherapists may treat:

### Orthopaedics

- Back and neck pain
- Sports injuries
- Repetitive strain injuries (i.e.: carpal tunnel, tennis elbow)
- Motor vehicle accidents
- Post-surgical rehabilitation (i.e.: hip or knee replacement)

### Neurology

- Stroke
- Spinal cord injury
- Cerebral palsy
- Head injuries
- Parkinson's
- Multiple Sclerosis

## Cardiorespiratory

- Asthma
- Chronic obstructive lung disease
- Pneumonia
- Post-surgical rehabilitation (i.e.: cardiac, thoracic or abdominal)
- Cardiac rehabilitation
- Cystic Fibrosis

Physiotherapists also work in areas that span all three practice areas such as women's health (including pre and post natal care, and other women's health issues), incontinence, paediatric and senior's care. They also help manage the physical complications of cancer and its treatment, and care for physical symptoms associated with arthritic conditions.

## **Physiotherapy – How it Works**

Physiotherapy involves using a variety of techniques to help your muscles, joints, heart and lungs work to their potential. Physiotherapists work in partnership with individuals of all ages to break down barriers impeding physical function. Physiotherapy can help individuals living with congenital or chronic diseases or other debilitating conditions and can assist those recovering from: surgery; illness; neurological conditions such as stroke; injury; industrial or motor vehicle accidents; or age related conditions. The practice of physiotherapy is drug-free.

Fundamental to a physiotherapists' approach is an appreciation of your role in your own care. Physiotherapists work with you to integrate your care into your lifestyle. They are skilled in providing treatment, preventative advice, rehabilitation and care for people with long-term or terminal illness and will develop a full treatment plan to suit your unique needs.

Physiotherapists are university-educated, regulated health professionals that play an important role within your health care team.

## **Physiotherapy - What to Expect?**

When you see a physiotherapist, he or she will complete a thorough assessment that may include your health history, evaluation of pain and movement patterns, strength, joint range of motion, reflexes, sensation and cardiorespiratory status.

They will also examine relevant x-rays, laboratory tests, medical records and surgical notes. Based on this assessment, the physiotherapist develops a diagnosis and works in partnership with you to plan individualized goals and treatment programs.

Physiotherapists **promote independence**, including emphasis on how you can help yourself. For example, you may be shown exercises that you can do between treatment sessions and how to set goals to achieve results. Where appropriate, physiotherapists also advise care-givers on how they can help you.

## What Can The Treatment Involve?

Some treatment options:

- Strengthening and therapeutic exercise programs
- Mobility and flexibility improvement
- Improvements in muscle imbalances and alignment
- Balance retraining and movement coordination
- Manual therapy – intervention to reduce pain and stiffness
- Electrical modalities such as TENS (electrical nerve stimulation) or ultrasound
- Gait retraining and general conditioning regimes
- Acupuncture – some physiotherapists are trained to use this technique to help alleviate your pain

Physiotherapists are **primary care practitioners** offering **direct access** to physiotherapy services without the need for physician referral. It's important to note that some extended health insurance plans require a physician's referral in order to reimburse you for claims.

In hospitals, physiotherapy may be provided to in-patients or through an out-patient clinic. Many out-patient clinics provide rehabilitation programs for people who have had surgery, are recovering from strokes or heart attacks. Not all hospitals, however, have out-patient physiotherapy programs or programs that can address your specific needs. Check with your local hospital to determine what services are available in your area.

Long-Term Care homes may provide services through an onsite physiotherapist or contract with a local provider. Community services may also provide physiotherapy for individuals in their homes.

Physiotherapy services may also be obtained through private means, where available.

*Information in this communiqué has been reproduced from information on the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's<sup>1</sup> website and used with permission. For more information about physiotherapy or physiotherapy as a career visit the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's website at [www.physiotherapy.ca](http://www.physiotherapy.ca).*

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<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA) is the national professional association representing almost 10,000 physiotherapists distributed throughout all provinces and territories. The CPA's mission is to provide leadership and direction to the physiotherapy profession, foster excellence in practice, education and research, and promote high standards of health in Canada.