PHYSICAL THERAPIST ASSISTANT (PTA)

Physical Therapist Assistants (PTA’s) work under the direction and supervision of physical therapists. They help patients who are recovering from injuries and illnesses regain movement and manage pain. Physical therapist assistants are involved in the direct care of patients.

Physical therapist assistants typically do the following:
- Observe patients before, during, and after therapy, noting their status and reporting to a physical therapist
- Help patients do specific exercises as part of the plan of care
- Use a variety of techniques, such as massage and stretching, to treat patients
- Use devices and equipment, such as walkers, to help patients
- Educate a patient and family members about what to do after treatment

Physical therapist assistants help physical therapists (PTs) provide care to patients. Under the direction and supervision of physical therapists, they give therapy through exercise, massage, gait and balance training, and therapeutic modalities, such as electrical stimulation and ultrasound. Physical therapist assistants record patients’ progress and report the results of each treatment to the physical therapist.

IMPORTANT QUALITIES
- **Compassion.** Physical therapy is an important part of the recovery process for people who have been through surgeries, illnesses, and injuries. Physical therapist assistants should enjoy helping people.
- **Detail oriented.** Like other healthcare professionals, physical therapist assistants should be organized and have a keen eye for detail. They must keep accurate records and follow written instructions carefully to ensure quality care.
- **Dexterity.** Physical therapist assistants should be comfortable using their hands to provide manual therapy and therapeutic exercises. They should also be comfortable working with their hands to set up equipment and prepare treatment areas.
- **Interpersonal skills.** Physical therapist assistants spend much of their time interacting with clients. They should be courteous and friendly.
- **Physical stamina.** Physical therapist assistants are frequently on their feet and moving as they work with their patients. They must often kneel, stoop, bend and stand for long periods. They should enjoy physical activity.

EDUCATION/LICENSURE

*Physical therapist assistants* typically earn an associate degree from an accredited program. In 2014, there were 309 associate’s degree programs for physical therapist assistants accredited by the *Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education.* [www.capteonline.org/Programs/](http://www.capteonline.org/Programs/)

Programs are divided into academic coursework and clinical experience. Academic courses include algebra, English, anatomy and physiology, and psychology. Clinical work includes certification in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and other first aid and hands-on experience in treatment centers. Many physical therapist assistants continue their formal education to qualify for jobs in administration, management, and education.

All states except Hawaii require physical therapist assistants to be licensed. Licensure typically requires graduation from an accredited physical therapist assistant program and passing the National Physical Therapy Exam. Some states require additional state-administered exams. In some states, physical therapist assistants also need to take continuing education courses. For more information contact the Virginia Board of Physical Therapy [www.dhp.virginia.gov/PhysicalTherapy/](http://www.dhp.virginia.gov/PhysicalTherapy/)
Related Accredited Schools in Virginia

- Germanna Community College (pending)
- Jefferson College of Health Sciences
- Tidewater Community College
- Northern Virginia Community College
- Wytheville Community College
- Riverside School of Health Careers – Newport News, VA
- South University – Richmond, VA
- South University – Virginia Beach, VA

AVERAGE SALARY

The median annual wage for physical therapist assistants was $52,160 in May 2012. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $32,420, and the top 10 percent earned more than $72,720.

JOB OUTLOOK

Employment of physical therapist assistants is expected to increase 41 percent from 2012 to 2020, much faster than the average for all occupations.

Demand for physical therapy services is expected to increase in response to the health needs of an aging population, particularly the large baby-boom generation. This group is staying more active later in life than previous generations. However, many baby boomers also are entering the prime age for heart attacks and strokes, increasing the demand for cardiac and physical rehabilitation. Older people are particularly vulnerable to a number of chronic and debilitating conditions that require therapeutic services. These patients often need additional help in their treatment, making the roles of physical therapist assistants vital.

In addition, the incidence of chronic conditions such as diabetes and obesity is growing. More physical therapist assistants and aides will be needed to help patients maintain their mobility and manage the effects of such conditions.

Medical and technological developments should permit an increased percentage of trauma victims and newborns with birth defects to survive, creating added demand for therapy and rehabilitative services. In addition, federal health legislation will expand the number of patients who have access to health insurance, increasing patient access to physical therapy services.

Opportunities for physical therapist assistants are expected to be very good. Physical therapist assistants will be needed to help physical therapists care for and manage more patients. However, physical therapist aides may face strong competition from the large pool of qualified people. Job opportunities should be particularly good in acute hospital, skilled nursing, and outpatient orthopedic settings, where the elderly are most often treated. Job prospects should be especially favorable in rural areas, as many physical therapists cluster in highly populated urban and suburban areas.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Physical therapist assistants held about 71,400 jobs in 2012. The industries that employed the most physical therapist assistants in 2012 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Employment Percent</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physical, occupational and speech therapists, and audiologists</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals; state, local, and private</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing care facilities (skilled nursing facilities)</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physicians</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>3%</td>
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</tbody>
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Physical therapist assistants are frequently on their feet and moving as they set up equipment and help and treat patients. Because they must often lift and move patients, they are vulnerable to back injuries. Assistants can limit these risks by using proper techniques when they assist patients. Most physical therapist assistants work full time. Many physical therapy offices and clinics have evening and weekend hours to accommodate patients’ schedules.
PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

American Physical Therapy Association
1111 N. Fairfax Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 684-2782
(800) 999-2782
http://www.apta.org

Virginia Physical Therapy Association
1111 N. Fairfax Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
(800) 999-2782 ext. 3235, ext. 3235
http://www.vpta.org

Virginia Board of Physical Therapy
Perimeter Center
9960 Mayland Drive, Suite 300
Henrico, VA 23233-1463
Phone: (804)367-4674
Fax: (804)527-4413
http://www.dhp.virginia.gov/PhysicalTherapy/