

OCCUPATIONAL OUTLOOK HANDBOOK

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Physical Therapists

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Summary



[Job Outlook](#)

Employment of physical therapists is projected to grow 14 percent from 2023 to 2033, much faster than the average for all occupations.

About 13,600 openings for physical therapists are projected each year, on average, over the decade. Many of those openings are expected to result from the need to replace workers who transfer to different occupations or exit the labor force, such as to retire.

[State & Area Data](#)

Explore resources for employment and wages by state and area for physical therapists.

[Similar Occupations](#)

Compare the job duties, education, job growth, and pay of physical therapists with similar occupations.

[More Information, Including Links to O*NET](#)

Learn more about physical therapists by visiting additional resources, including O*NET, a source on key characteristics of workers and occupations.

[What They Do ->](#)

What Physical Therapists Do



Physical therapists evaluate and record a patient's progress.

Physical therapists help injured or ill people improve movement and manage pain. They are often an important part of preventive care, rehabilitation, and treatment for patients with chronic conditions, illnesses, or injuries.

Duties

Physical therapists typically do the following:

- Review patients' medical history and referrals or notes from doctors, surgeons, or other healthcare workers
- Diagnose patients' functions and movements by observing them stand or walk and by listening to their concerns
- Develop individualized plans of care for patients, outlining the patients' goals and the expected outcomes of the plans
- Use exercises, stretching maneuvers, hands-on therapy, and equipment to ease patients' pain, help them increase their mobility, prevent further pain or injury, and facilitate health and wellness
- Evaluate and record a patients' progress, modifying the plan of care and trying new treatments as needed
- Educate patients and their families about what to expect from the recovery process and how to cope with challenges throughout the process

Physical therapists, sometimes called *PTs*, care for people of all ages who have functional problems resulting from back and neck injuries; sprains, strains, and fractures; arthritis; amputations; neurological disorders, such as stroke or cerebral palsy; injuries related to work and sports; and other conditions.

Physical therapists use a variety of techniques to care for their patients. These techniques include exercises; training in functional movement, which may include the use of equipment such as canes, crutches, wheelchairs, and walkers; and special movements of joints, muscles, and other soft tissue to improve mobility and decrease pain.

The work of physical therapists varies by type of patient. For example, a patient working to recover mobility lost after a stroke needs care different from that of a patient recovering from a sports injury. Some physical therapists specialize in one type of care, such as orthopedics or geriatrics. Many physical therapists also help patients maintain or improve mobility by developing fitness and wellness programs that encourage healthy, active lifestyles.

Physical therapists work as part of a healthcare team, overseeing the work of [physical therapist assistants and aides](#) and consulting with [physicians and surgeons](#) and other specialists.

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Work Environment



Physical therapists use exercises and stretching maneuvers to ease patients' pain.

Physical therapists held about 259,200 jobs in 2023. The largest employers of physical therapists were as follows:

Offices of physical, occupational and speech therapists, and audiologists	35%
Hospitals; state, local, and private	28
Home healthcare services	10
Nursing and residential care facilities	6
Self-employed workers	4

Physical therapists spend much of their time on their feet, working with patients. Because they must often lift and move patients, they are vulnerable to back injuries. Physical therapists can limit these risks by using proper body mechanics and lifting techniques when assisting patients.

Work Schedules

Most physical therapists work full time, although part time work is common. They usually work during normal business hours, but some work evenings or weekends.

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[How to Become One ->](#)

How to Become a Physical Therapist



Physical therapists use a variety of techniques, such as massage and stretching, to treat patients.

Physical therapists entering the occupation need a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree. All states require physical therapists to be licensed.

Education

Physical therapists need a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree from a program accredited by the [Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education](#) (CAPTE).

DPT programs typically last 3 years. Physical therapy programs typically require a bachelor's [degree](#), which may be in [recreation and fitness](#) or [healthcare and related](#) fields, and prerequisite courses such as anatomy, chemistry, and physics.

Most DPT programs require candidates to apply through the [Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service](#) (PTCAS).

Physical therapist programs often include courses in biomechanics, neuroscience, and pharmacology. Physical therapist students also complete clinical work, during which they gain supervised experience in areas such as acute care and orthopedic care.

Physical therapists may apply to a clinical residency program after graduation. Residencies typically last about 1 year and provide additional training and experience in specialty areas of care. Physical therapists who have completed a residency program may choose to specialize further by participating in a fellowship in an advanced clinical area. The [American Board of Physical Therapy Residency and Fellowship Education](#) has directories of physical therapist residency and fellowship programs.

Licenses, Certifications, and Registrations

All states require physical therapists to be licensed, which includes passing the National Physical Therapy Examination administered by the [Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy](#). Other requirements vary by state. For example, some states also require a law exam and a criminal background check. Continuing education is typically required for physical therapists to keep their license. Check with your state board for specific licensing requirements.

After gaining work experience, some physical therapists choose to become a board-certified specialist. The [American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties](#) offers certification in clinical specialty areas of physical therapy, such as orthopedics, sports, and geriatrics. Board specialist certification requires passing an exam and completing clinical work in the specialty area.

Important Qualities

Communication skills. Physical therapists must clearly explain treatment programs, motivate patients, and listen to patients' concerns in order to provide effective therapy.

Compassion. Physical therapists spend a lot of time interacting with patients, so they should have a desire to help people. They work with people who are in pain and must have empathy for their patients.

Detail oriented. Like other healthcare providers, physical therapists should have strong analytic and observational skills to diagnose a patient's problem, evaluate treatments, and provide safe, effective care.

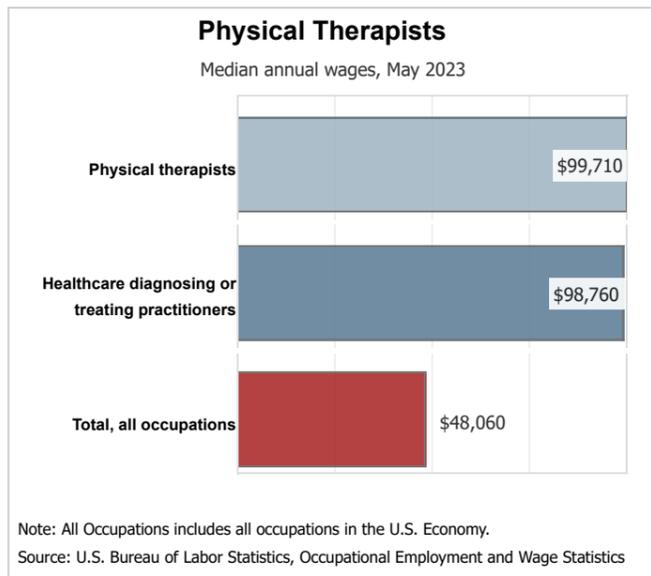
Dexterity. Physical therapists must use their hands to provide manual therapy and therapeutic exercises. They should feel comfortable massaging and otherwise physically assisting patients.

Physical stamina. Physical therapists spend much of their time on their feet, moving to demonstrate proper techniques and to help patients perform exercises. They should enjoy physical activity.

Resourcefulness. Physical therapists customize treatment plans for patients. They must be flexible and adapt plans of care to meet the needs of each patient.

Time-management skills. Physical therapists typically treat several patients each day. They must be able to provide appropriate care to patients as well as complete administrative tasks, such as documenting patient progress.

Pay



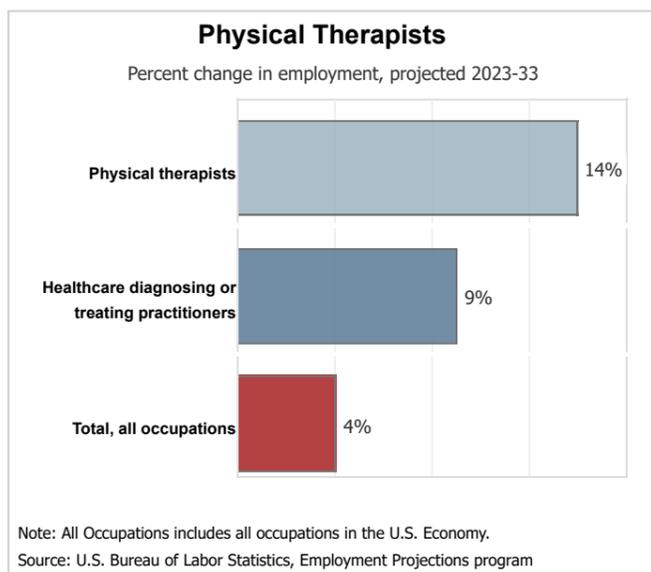
The median annual wage for physical therapists was \$99,710 in May 2023. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$72,260, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$130,870.

In May 2023, the median annual wages for physical therapists in the top industries in which they worked were as follows:

Home healthcare services	\$107,870
Hospitals; state, local, and private	103,690
Nursing and residential care facilities	102,810
Offices of physical, occupational and speech therapists, and audiologists	93,050

Most physical therapists work full time. Although most therapists work during normal business hours, some work evenings or weekends.

Job Outlook



Employment of physical therapists is projected to grow 14 percent from 2023 to 2033, much faster than the average for all occupations.

About 13,600 openings for physical therapists are projected each year, on average, over the decade. Many of those openings are expected to result from the need to replace workers who transfer to different occupations or exit the labor force, such as to retire.

Employment

Demand for physical therapy will come, in part, from the large number of aging baby boomers, who are staying more active later in life than their counterparts of previous generations. Older people are more likely to experience heart attacks, strokes, and mobility-related injuries that require physical therapy for rehabilitation.

In addition, a number of chronic conditions, such as diabetes and obesity, have become prevalent. More physical therapists will be needed to help people with these conditions maintain their mobility and manage their disease or illness.

A greater emphasis on non-opioid approaches to manage pain also is expected to support employment growth.

Employment projections data for physical therapists, 2023-33

Physical therapists
SOC Code: 29-1123
Employment, 2023:
SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program

259,200

Projected Employment, 2033:

296,000

Change, 2023-33 (Percent):

14

Change, 2023-33 (Numeric):

36,800

Employment By Industry:

[Get data](#)

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program

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State & Area Data

Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS)

The [Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics](#) (OEWS) program produces employment and wage estimates annually for over 800 occupations. These estimates are available for the nation as a whole, for individual states, and for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. The link(s) below go to OEWS data maps for employment and wages by state and area.

[Physical therapists](#)

Projections Central

Occupational employment projections are developed for all states by Labor Market Information (LMI) or individual state Employment Projections offices. All state projections data are available at www.projectionscentral.org. Information on this site allows projected employment growth for an occupation to be compared among states or to be compared within one state. In addition, states may produce projections for areas; there are links to each state's websites where these data may be retrieved.

CareerOneStop

CareerOneStop includes hundreds of [occupational profiles](#) with data available by state and metro area. There are links in the left-hand side menu to compare occupational employment by state and occupational wages by local area or metro area. There is also a [salary info tool](#) to search for wages by zip code.

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Similar Occupations

This table shows a list of occupations with job duties that are similar to those of physical therapists.

[Athletic Trainers](#)

Job Duties:

Athletic trainers specialize in preventing, diagnosing, and treating muscle and bone injuries and illnesses.

Entry-Level Education:

Master's degree

2023 Median Pay:

\$57,930

[Audiologists](#)

Job Duties:

Audiologists diagnose, manage, and treat patients who have hearing, balance, or related problems.

Entry-Level Education:

Doctoral or professional degree

2023 Median Pay:

\$87,740

[Chiropractors](#)

Job Duties:

Chiropractors assess, treat, and care for patients by manipulating the spine and musculoskeletal system.

Entry-Level Education:

Doctoral or professional degree

2023 Median Pay:

\$76,530

[Exercise Physiologists](#)

Job Duties:

Exercise physiologists develop fitness and exercise programs to help people improve their health.

Entry-Level Education:

Bachelor's degree

2023 Median Pay:

\$54,860

[Nurse Anesthetists, Nurse Midwives, and Nurse Practitioners](#)

Job Duties:

Nurse anesthetists, nurse midwives, and nurse practitioners coordinate patient care and may provide primary and specialty healthcare.

Entry-Level Education:

Master's degree

2023 Median Pay:

\$129,480

Occupational Therapists**Job Duties:**

Occupational therapists evaluate and treat people who have injuries, illnesses, or disabilities to help them with vocational, daily living, and other skills that promote independence.

Entry-Level Education:

Master's degree

2023 Median Pay:

\$96,370

Orthotists and Prosthetists**Job Duties:**

Orthotists and prosthetists measure, design, fit, and adapt medical devices, such as supportive braces and artificial limbs, for patients who have disabling conditions.

Entry-Level Education:

Master's degree

2023 Median Pay:

\$78,100

Physical Therapist Assistants and Aides**Job Duties:**

Physical therapist assistants and aides are supervised by physical therapists to help patients regain movement and manage pain after injuries and illnesses.

Entry-Level Education:

[See How to Become One](#)

2023 Median Pay:

\$58,740

Physician Assistants**Job Duties:**

Physician assistants examine, diagnose, and treat patients under the supervision of a physician.

Entry-Level Education:

Master's degree

2023 Median Pay:

\$130,020

Recreational Therapists**Job Duties:**

Recreational therapists plan, direct, and coordinate recreation-based medical treatment programs for people with disabilities, injuries, or illnesses.

Entry-Level Education:

Bachelor's degree

2023 Median Pay:

\$57,120

Speech-Language Pathologists**Job Duties:**

Speech-language pathologists assess and treat people who have communication disorders.

Entry-Level Education:

Master's degree

2023 Median Pay:

\$89,290

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Contacts for More Information

For more information about physical therapists, visit

[American Physical Therapy Association](#)

For more information about accredited physical therapy programs, visit

[Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education](#)

For more information about state licensing requirements and about the National Physical Therapy Exam, visit

[Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy](#)

For more information about certification, visit

[American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties](#)

For more information about residency and fellowship opportunities, visit

[American Board of Physical Therapy Residency and Fellowship Education](#)

For more information about how to apply to DPT programs, visit

[Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service](#) (PTCAS)

CareerOneStop

For a career video on physical therapists, visit

[Physical Therapists](#)

O*NET

[Physical Therapists](#)

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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Physical Therapists, at <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/physical-therapists.htm> (visited October 24, 2024).

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