

COVER STORY

# The aches and pains of life

## Physical therapy gets patients back to optimum health

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There are many ways to injure the body. Sometimes it is because of something big, such as a car wreck or a sports game. Sometimes, the little things can hurt you, such as cleaning the house or bending over to pick a napkin off the floor. Luckily, there are ways to heal the body as well. For a pain that just won't go away, physical therapy can be an answer.

### Defining PT

According to the Guide to Physical Therapist Practice, physical therapists, or PTs:

- Diagnose and manage movement dysfunction and enhance physical and functional abilities.
- Restore, maintain and promote not only optimal physical function, but optimal wellness and fitness and optimal quality of life as it relates to movement and health.
- Prevent the onset, symptoms and progression of impairments, functional limitations and disabilities that may result from diseases, disorders, conditions or injuries.

Physical therapists treat more than 750,000 people every day in the United States.

Physical therapists focus on both preventing injuries and helping individuals recover, according to the American Physical Therapy Association. They work with other health care providers and are employed in private physical therapy offices, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, community health centers, nursing homes, sports facilities, research institutions and schools.

Physical therapists graduate with either a master's or doctoral degree. Physical therapist assistants receive an associate's degree.

"Our definition is being able to get people back into life — back to where they



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Melissa Mitchell, a physical therapist technician at Madison Physical Therapy, uses an ultrasound on Julie Nesbitt's elbow which Nesbitt injured while swimming.

were," said Randy Calico, physical therapist at Madison Physical Therapy Associates in Richmond.

"We evaluate and look at the function of muscles, joints and sometimes nerves," said Lynn Collins, physical therapist at Madison Physical Therapy Associates in Richmond.

### Back to normal

Physical therapists usually see the patient after pain is already there, Calico said.

"We don't live in a wellness society. We tend to wait until we're hurt," Collins said.

PTs see a lot of neck, back, shoulder and knee injuries, Calico said. They also see a lot of total knee and hip replacements and nerve injuries.

PTs often work with industry to get people back to work. They evaluate office stations, they work in school systems and they do immediate acute care in hospitals.

The length of a patient's treatment program depends on their injury, but the average is four to six weeks, two to three times a week, Calico said.

Many patients don't come to see the PT right away after an injury, though.

"What you'll find is that most people will wait to see if it'll go away. That lengthens their (treatment) time," Collins said.

When a new patient comes in, the first thing the PT does is an evaluation. Then they determine the treatment.

"That's when it's really fun to be a PT. You do problem-solving to get to the cause," Calico said.

PTs try to find the cause of the cause of a problem, Calico said. For example, if you injure your shoulder, a PT will evaluate the cause of the acute injury. But then they will go a step further to look at daily activities and movement to see what may have weakened the shoulder in the first place.

There are three main types of physical therapy treatments: modalities, manual therapy and exercises. Modalities consist of heat therapy, ice therapy, electrical stimulation of a muscle or nerve or ultrasound.



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LEFT: Billy Sewell, who had recent knee replacement surgery, does a knee-strengthening exercise at Madison Physical Therapy.

ABOVE: Lynn Collins, right, physical therapist at Madison Physical Therapy, uses iontophoresis to treat Rebecca Newsome's lateral epicondylitis or tennis elbow. The iontophoresor pushes ions of antiinflammatory medication into the tissue under the left pad while the other pad acts as a ground.

Manual therapy is what most people think of with PT — when the therapist works directly hands-on with the joints and muscles. Exercises may include weight training, the treadmill or a therapeutic pool.

There often is a misconception about PTs, Collins said. Although PTs use some massage techniques as part of the treatment, they are not massage therapists. "It's manually working with joints and muscles to get them working properly," she said.

### Education and awareness

Education is a big part of the PT's interaction with a patient, and there is some wellness, Collins said.

"Education is probably one of the biggest parts — what caused the problem and how to keep it from happening again," Calico said.

Educating people when they're young is important, Collins said. For example, when schoolchildren sling their backpacks on only one shoulder, it causes the body to be unbalanced. This can cause problems that may not show up until years later. Teaching school kids how to correctly carry a backpack can prevent those problems, Collins said.

PTs do a lot of body mechanics, where they look at a patient's form while they per-



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Randy Calico, physical therapist at Madison Physical Therapy, does passive range of motion on the legs of Oscar Pedro, a T10 incomplete parapalegic. The range of motion exercises keep Pedro's joints loose and muscles stretched.

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