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.

**DUTIES**

Physical therapist assistants typically do the following:
- Observe patients before, during, and after therapy, noting patient status and reporting it to a physical therapist
- Help patients do specific exercises as part of the plan of care
- Treat patients using a variety of techniques, such as massage and stretching
- 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/LICENSE**

All states require physical therapist assistants to have an associate’s degree from an accredited physical therapist assistant program. There were more than 300 associate’s degree programs for physical therapist assistants accredited by the Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education in 2015.

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 require physical therapist assistants to be licensed or certified. Licensure typically requires graduation from an accredited physical therapist assistant program and passing the National Physical Therapy Exam for physical therapist assistants administered by the Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy. Some states
require that applicants pass additional state-administered exams, undergo a criminal background check, and be at least 18 years old. Physical therapist assistants also may need to take continuing education courses to keep their license. Check with your state board for specific licensing requirements: Virginia Board of Physical Therapy
www.dhp.virginia.gov/PhysicalTherapy/

Accredited Schools in Virginia

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

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Physical therapist assistants held about 78,700 jobs in 2014. Physical therapist aides held about 50,000 jobs in 2014. The industries that employed the most physical therapist assistants in 2014 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry Description</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physical, occupational, &amp; speech therapists &amp; audiologists</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals; state, local, &amp; private</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing care facilities (skilled nursing facilities)</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home healthcare services</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physicians</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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. PTA’s can limit these risks by using proper techniques when they assist patients.

Most physical therapist assistants and aides work full time. Some night and weekend work may be required as many physical therapy offices and clinics have extended hours to accommodate patients’ schedules.

JOB OUTLOOK

Employment of physical therapist assistants is projected to grow **41 percent** from 2014 to 2024, much faster than the average for all occupations. U.S News & World Report, in their article “Best Health Care Support Jobs of 2016,” claims that Physical Therapist Assistants hold the number four spot. http://money.usnews.com/careers/best-jobs/rankings/best-health-care-support-jobs

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 also 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 and aides vital.

In addition, a number of chronic conditions, such as diabetes and obesity, have become more prevalent in recent years. More physical therapist assistants will be needed to manage the effects of such conditions and help patients maintain their mobility.

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, the number of individuals who have access to health insurance is expected to continue to increase because of federal health insurance reform.
Physical therapists are expected to increasingly use physical therapist assistants, particularly in long-term care environments, in order to reduce the cost of physical therapy services. Once the physical therapist has evaluated a patient and designed a plan of care, the assistant can provide many parts of the treatment, as directed by the therapist.

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. Job opportunities should be particularly good in settings where the elderly are most often treated, such as skilled-nursing homes, home health, and outpatient orthopedic facilities. Job prospects should be especially favorable in rural areas, as many physical therapists cluster in highly populated urban and suburban areas.

**AVERAGE SALARY**

The median annual wage for physical therapist assistants was $54,410 in May 2014. 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 $31,840, and the top 10 percent earned more than $75,530.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nursing care facilities (skilled nursing facilities)</th>
<th>$62,280</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home healthcare services</td>
<td>$59,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physical, occupational, &amp; speech therapists, &amp; audiologists</td>
<td>$53,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals; state, local, &amp; private</td>
<td>$51,870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physicians</td>
<td>$51,790</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

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

**Contacts for More Information**

For more information about physical therapist assistants, visit: [American Physical Therapy Association](http://www.apta.org)

For a list of schools offering accredited programs, visit: [Commission on Accreditation in Physical Therapy Education](http://www.apta.org)

For more information about state licensing requirements and about the National Physical Therapy Exam, visit: [Federation of State Boards of Physical Therapy](http://www.fsbpt.org)
O*NET Physical Therapist Assistants

REFERENCE