

# How to Feel Better with Physical Therapy

By Charles Hammond

We've all felt it. That first twinge in the back or stiffness of the knee that means that, like it or not, we're not as young as we used to be. Unfortunately, these days people are feeling those twinges at younger and younger ages, thanks to our ever more sedentary lifestyle. Whether you're a school age kid without a phys education program and with a Twinkie habit, or a baby boomer who goes from couch to car to desk to car to couch again, most Americans need to get up and move. And when those twinges, aches and pains become so severe that they start to affect your quality of life, you probably need to look into some professional physical therapy.

Naturally, the first thing you need to do is consult your doctor. Perhaps you're actually not a couch potato but a weekend warrior whose knee gave out while coaching soccer. Or maybe you're a senior citizen who isn't willing to accept limited mobility as a consequence of growing old. No matter what your situation, your doctor should be your first stop. He'll probably recommend an MRI of the affected area, and perhaps will be able to provide a referral to a reputable physical therapist. Or try contacting the American Physical Therapy Association at 1-800-999-2781, or at [apta.org](http://apta.org). Not only can they help you find a member therapist in your area, but also sell a book of "Body Maintenance and Repair" that tells you "everything you need to know about keeping your body in peak physical condition."

Physical therapy is used to help treat a wide variety of ailments and injuries. There are physical therapy specialties in everything from cardiovascular health to pediatrics, women's health issues, oncology and geriatrics. Physical therapy can be recommended for treatment after an injury, as a way of improving circulation, as part of recovering from surgery, as part of ongoing treatment for osteoarthritis or osteoporosis. Whereas the common wisdom concerning joint pain and reduced mobility, particularly for women, used to be a variation on "you're just getting old," advances in physical therapy and exercise physiology have proven that the right program of exercises or treatments recommended by a physical therapist can improve or even reverse some of the ill effects of aging.

Physical therapy in some cases is recommended as an alternative to surgery. For example, with some damaged or frayed components of knees or elbows, strengthening the surrounding muscled through a course of physical therapy can be an alternative to surgery. Though, if you

have a severe pain in your knees, back or other joints, don't just assume you can "walk it off." Consulting a licensed physical therapist will provide you with the proper exercises you need to do to help alleviate, not worsen, your problem. With the wide availability of gym memberships, physical therapists now have more and more to work with in terms of being able to recommend specialized equipment or environments. For example, walking in shallow water provides low impact resistance where putting weight on an injury might cause severe pain or further damage.

A full course of physical therapy, depending upon the initial problem, will often include elements of other disciplines, from massage to chiropractics, as well as things like yoga, Alexander technique (posture exercises) and even ultrasound. Physical therapy has also shown itself to be useful in treating things you might not think of like headaches, neurological disorders and many other types of chronic pain. And physical therapy, while not inexpensive, can cost far less than more drastic surgical measures. Physical therapy can have psychological benefits as well, particularly if you're someone unused to exercise, physical therapy can open a whole new world of care of and respect for your body and how it works.

As with all medical treatment, spend some time researching physical therapist and physical therapy centers in your area and find one which you feel comfortable with and don't feel uncomfortable asking for references. Most physical therapy centers accept Medicare and other insurance, but check with your carrier to make sure that your treatment is covered and if you must have a doctor's referral to qualify. And of course, check with your local Better Business Bureau, AMA Chapter and other professional organizations to make sure you're getting the best and safest professional treatment available.