

PENNSYLVANIA STATE BOARD OF PHYSICAL THERAPY



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What is the Difference Between a Physical Therapist and a Physical Therapist Assistant?

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I would say the most obvious answer to this question is the education level between the two. The following is taken from the [American Physical Therapy Association](http://www.americanphysicaltherapy.org) website:

All Physical Therapists must receive a graduate degree from an accredited physical therapist program before taking the national licensure examination that allows them to practice. The majority of programs offer the doctor of physical therapy (DPT) degree. The minimum educational requirement is a post-baccalaureate degree from an accredited education program. While some programs offer a master's degree, a growing majority of programs offer the Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree. Currently, 199 colleges and universities nationwide offer accredited professional physical therapist education programs; 92 percent offer the DPT, and the remaining programs are planning to convert.

The Pennsylvania Physical Therapy Practice Act (practice act) addresses the qualifications for physical therapist (PT) licensure and physical therapist assistant (PTA) certification. For licensure as a PT, section 6(a) of the practice act states:

An applicant completing the professional study of physical therapy after 2002 must hold a minimum of a master's degree from a regionally accredited institution of higher education. An applicant completing the professional study of physical therapy between January 1967 and 2002 must hold a minimum of a baccalaureate degree from a regionally accredited institution of higher education.

Section 9.1 of the practice act provides:

To be eligible for certification by the board as a physical therapist assistant, an applicant must ... be a graduate of a physical therapist assistant program adopted by the board, which program has been approved for the education and training for physical therapist assistants by the appropriate nationally recognized accrediting agency and be successful in passing an examination approved by the board, subject to rules and regulations established by the board and administered in accordance with ... 'The Administrative Code of 1929.'

To become certified and be able to work as a PTA, an individual must graduate with an associate degree (two years, usually five semesters) from an accredited PTA program at a technical or community college, college or university. There are currently 237 PTA programs across the country. In most states, graduates must pass the national examination for licensing/certification/registration to be eligible to work.

A PTA works under the supervision and direction of a PT. A PTA may perform only activities for which the PTA has received formal education and training. A PTA may provide patient-care services as specified in the patient's plan of care, modify treatment techniques as indicated in the patient's plan of care, respond to acute changes in the patient's

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physiological state, and perform selected tests and measurements consistent with the PTA's formal education and training.

Examples include assisting in instructing patients in exercises and activities of daily living (including physical modalities), using special equipment, collecting data on the patient's progress, and documenting and reporting on the patient's response. A PTA may not interpret referrals or tests, perform evaluation procedures, initiate treatment programs, assume responsibility for planning patient care or perform activities that require formal education or training and the skill and knowledge of a licensed PT.

So what are the differences between PT and PTA when you are working in the profession? First, a PTA cannot treat a patient until the PT has done the initial evaluation. PTs do all re-evaluations, discharge summaries and screens, as well. Once the initial evaluation is done, then the PTA can build a treatment program to address the goals that the PT has set for the patient to achieve.

Lastly, there is one more very important point about the differences between a PT and PTA. Until recently, a PTA was required to always work under the direct on-premises supervision of a PT. Now, the required level of supervision is a function of many factors, including the practice setting.

In order to take advantage of this new standard and practice under less than direct, on-premises supervision where permitted, the PTA must first obtain an indirect supervision certification from the board. In order to qualify, the PTA must either have at least 2,000 hours of experience providing patient-related acts and services verified by a supervising licensed physical therapist or have been employed as a physical therapist assistant for at least three of the five years immediately preceding Oct. 2, 2008. The application can be downloaded at www.dos.state.pa.us/physther. This certification replaces the PTA's existing certification that permitted practice only under the direct on-premises supervision of a PT.

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