

Physical Therapy for Prevention, Not Just Rehabilitation

Prevention is the best medicine. In order to know what you need to prevent, it is important to recognize the signs and symptoms that will result in a particular disease or dysfunction. Physical therapists are joint movement experts and can identify joint movement patterns and weaknesses that will likely result in degenerative joint disease, muscle weakness, pain and/or loss of balance. Imagine stopping balance loss before a fall, improving your hip strength to prevent a knee surgery, and using stairs without hesitation. All can be accomplished through preventative physical therapy.

Most of our muscle aches, joint pains, weaknesses, and balance difficulties develop because we don't use the best joint mechanics when we function. We do this because our bodies try to be energy efficient and want to perform our daily tasks using as little energy as possible. "Bad" posture in sitting is an energy conserving strategy, as is shifting your weight from one leg to another when standing still. Bending over to pick something up using your back instead of your legs is another example. Energy conserving strategies are used at the expense of the joints and puts stress on them causing degeneration. These habits often result in pain, weakness and loss of function.

In our bodies' quest to conserve energy we end up breaking down our joints. The good news is you can prevent it before it starts by having these body movement patterns diagnosed before there is a problem. Licensed physical therapists are the only healthcare professionals who are specifically trained and qualified to recognize these movement patterns. A physical therapist can evaluate an individual who is currently experiencing minimal pain and will recognize the specific movement patterns that can lead to joint degeneration and acute pain.

Physical Therapists are qualified to evaluate these issues because they understand joint mechanics, as well as have an intimate understanding of how one joint affects another joint. For example, a person may have knee or hip pain when they walk, which is the result of their foot mechanics. This movement pattern can never be seen on an x-ray but can be diagnosed in a physical therapist's office. Another example is arm numbness with prolonged typing which can be the result of poor neck posture when looking at a computer screen.

Physical therapists have an extensive education in anatomy, joint movement, posture and rehabilitation. A licensed physical therapist must earn a bachelor's degree before completing either a masters or a doctorate degree from an accredited physical therapy program before they can practice as a physical therapist. This process usually takes 7 years.

Physical therapists are not only trained to recognize joint movement patterns but they are also specifically trained to restore proper function whether it be preventative, post-surgical rehabilitation, accumulative stress injury, traumatic injury or chronic pain. They do this by utilizing specific techniques which include but are not limited to joint mobilizations, massage, therapeutic exercise, postural re-education, core activation, taping, orthotics and pain control modalities.

To prolong the life of your joints and maintain a lifetime of function, you can have a physical therapist evaluate your posture and joint mechanics. If you have a weakness, postural faults or poor movement strategy the physical therapist can identify it, treat it, and prevent it from ultimately causing pain. If you are currently pain free and want to prevent low back pain, knee pain, hip pain or balance loss, have an evaluation with a physical therapist. If you want to boost your walking, running or increase your exercise level, have a physical therapist evaluate your joint mechanics in order to prevent an exercise induced injury and time away from your fitness program. If you sit for prolonged periods of time in an office and are starting to notice some upper back pain and poor posture you can have your posture evaluated. A physical therapist can help you improve your movement strategies, posture and strength which will allow you to continue to function at your current level or elevate you to a higher level all while preventing injury, surgery and pain.

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