Basics of Physical Therapy

**Physical therapy** is a type of medical service that evaluates and treats disorders of the muscles, ligaments, tendons, cartilages, bones and joints – the musculoskeletal system. The primary purposes of physical therapy is to relieve pain, return an injured employee to their prior range of motion, and return the employee to their prior level of physical function. If the prior range of motion and level of functioning cannot be reached, the therapist will work with the injured employee in order for the employee to reach the maximal functional level within the restrictions created by the injury. Physical therapy is also known as physiotherapy.

**A physical therapist** is a trained and licensed medical specialist who will have either master’s degree or a doctorate degree in physical therapy. As a health care professional, their training incorporates a high level of knowledge on how the musculoskeletal system works and what is needed to overcome limitations of the musculoskeletal system caused by an injury. The physical therapist will normally work at a physical therapy clinic, either independent, or associated with a doctor’s office or hospital.

**When a treating doctor**, often an orthopedic doctor, requests physical therapy for an injured employee, the physical therapist will schedule the first appointment for the employee. During the initial appointment (the evaluation visit) the physical therapist will:

* Examine the employee’s body part needing therapy
* Measure and test the employee’s
  + Strength
  + Range of motion
  + Balance, if applicable
  + Flexibility
  + Coordination
  + Muscle performance
  + Posture, if applicable
  + Endurance
* Develop a treatment plan to accomplish the physician’s goal in the allotted number of sessions (see below)

**Each patient** (injured employee) will have a customized treatment plan that is designed to address the employee’s specific needs and restore the employee’s normal body movement. The length of the treatment is normally controlled by the physician requesting the physical therapy. A typical prescription for physical therapy will read something like 3 X 6, which tells the therapist that the doctor wants the injured employee to attend the physical therapy sessions 3 times a week for 6 weeks.

**In subsequent visits,** the physical therapist will provide medical treatment to the injured body part. To restore the employee’s functioning level following an injury, the physical therapist will employee various approaches. This can include:

* Provide ultrasound treatment or electrical stimulation, if needed to ease pain
* Provide cold compresses or hot packs, if needed to ease pain or reduce swelling
* Provide traction and/or deep tissue massage, if needed
* Provide exercises to improve muscle strength, range of motion and muscle performance

**While the physical therapy sessions** may or may not ultrasound, electrical stimulation, cold or hot packs, traction and/or massage, they will almost always include exercises to improve strength, flexibility and endurance. The exercises often include:

* Stretching
* Pulling
* Pushing
* Weight lifting
* Core stabilization exercises

**In workers compensation,** physical therapy is normally used to deal with strains and sprains of body joints and sprains/strains of the spinal column. Also, physical therapy is normally utilized after surgery to return the injury body part to its former level of functioning.

**Physical therapy** is used in many ways that are not a part of the workers’ compensation world including:

* Sport injuries
* Burn victims
* Elderly people
* Cardiovascular and pulmonary medical issues
* Spinal stenosis
* Cerebral Palsy & Bell’s Palsy
* Multiple Sclerosis

**The results achieved** from physical therapy will depend on several factors including the employee’s motivation, the presence of comorbid issues (like diabetes or obesity), the extent of the injury and the skill of the physical therapist. Properly utilized, physical therapy reduces the injured employee’s recovery time, improves their physical functioning (therefore reducing or eliminating the payment of permanent partial disability) and strengthens the employee’s musculoskeletal system, allowing an earlier return to work.