Differences between Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy

**Most Workers Comp Injuries Require Physical Therapy**

To people who are not in the medical field, there is often confusion between physical therapy and occupational therapy. People often think injured employees will have “occupational” therapy as the injury arose out of their occupation. While there are some instances where an injured employee will need occupational therapy, in most workers’ compensation claims, the injured employee needs physical therapy, not occupational therapy. While physical therapists and occupational therapists deal with many medical issues outside of workers’ compensation, this discussion will be limited to therapy treatment related to workers’ compensation.

**Physical Therapy Restores Musculoskeletal System**

Physical therapy is a medical service designed to develop, maintain or restore the injured employee’s musculoskeletal system. When a treating physician refers an injured employee to a physical therapist, the physician will specify the anticipated number of physical therapy sessions needed to restore the employee to the maximum level of recovery.

Upon the receipt of a new physical therapy prescription for the employee, the therapist will schedule the first visit. At the first visit and in subsequent physical therapy sessions the therapist will:

* Examine the employee’s body part needing therapy
* Measure and test the employee’s
  + Strength
  + Range of motion
  + Balance, if applicable
  + Coordination
  + Muscle performance
  + Posture, if applicable
* Develop a treatment plan to accomplish the physician’s goal in the allotted number of sessions
* Provide exercises to improve muscle strength, range of motion and muscle performance
* Provide traction and/or deep tissue massage, if needed
* Provide cold compresses or hot packs, if needed
* Provide ultrasound treatment or electrical stimulation, if needed

**Goal to Improve Movement Dysfunctions**

The overall goal of physical therapy is the improvement of an injured employee’s movement dysfunctions and returning the injured employee to the maximum level of musculoskeletal function.

**Occupational Therapy Trains To Improve Functional Abilities**

Occupational therapy is medical services designed to train and educate an injured person in how to modify their physical environment to improve their functional abilities. Often the occupational therapist will provide instruction on how to use durable medical equipment (prosthetics, crutches and wheelchairs) to increase the employee’s functioning. The occupational therapist will evaluate the injured employee’s needs and will design a program to overcome the employee’s medical related deficiencies and improve the injured employee’s ability to perform the daily activities of their life. The occupational therapist will teach the injured employee how to adapt to their physical limitations caused by the work injury.

**Teaches to Adapt to Physical Limitations**

In addition to teaching an injured employee how to adapt to their new physical limitations, an occupational therapist will often teach the employee on how to prevent and avoid injuries. The occupational therapist will recommend to the injured employee equipment, gadgets and devices that are designed to increase the employee’s safety and increase the employee’s functional ability.

**Best Outcome When Physical and Occupational Therapist Work Together**

While there can be overlap between the activities of a physical therapist and an occupational therapist, the best outcome for the injured employee is when the occupational therapist and the physical therapist work together. For example: An employee is involved in a horrific accident that leaves the employee a paraplegic. The physical therapist will work extensively with the employee to maximize the employee’s remaining functioning of their musculoskeletal system. The occupational therapist will be brought in to train the employee in how to perform life functions from the confines of a wheelchair.