

What to Know about Therapy and Rehabilitation

Written by Scott Rowe, PT

The rehabilitation services provided by therapists play a key role in ensuring seniors achieve and maintain their highest level of independence. While you may have good intentions of trying to tough things out on your own, the services of a physical therapist, occupational therapist, or speech language pathologist can provide expertise and accountability to reach your goals quickly and effectively. This resource will take a closer look at these different therapy services as well as where and how you can access them. While therapists work in several different settings, treating conditions in people of all ages, we will focus solely on therapy services as they relate to older adults.

Types of Therapy

While there may be a number of different types of therapy, for the purpose of this paper, we will focus on those most commonly associated with older adults and rehabilitation. These include physical therapy (PT), occupational therapy (OT), and speech and language pathologists (SLP). Each of these therapists must be



licensed in the state where they are providing these therapy services. In addition, therapy assistants are also licensed to provide these services under the supervision of a therapist.

According to the American Physical Therapy Association, Physical Therapy is “treatment provided by a physical therapist or physical therapist assistant that helps people improve their movement and physical function, manage pain and other chronic conditions, and recover from and prevent injury and chronic disease.” Physical therapists are considered movement experts, and a great deal of their focus is on how the bones and muscles in the body work

together for healthy movement. But they also treat issues of the brain and nervous system, like helping patients recover after a stroke or brain injury or addressing balance issues. Addressing problems with pain through massage and manual therapy, treatments that use cold and heat, and strengthening and stretching exercises is another area of focus. In addition, physical therapy can address problems associated with heart and lungs, diabetes, or weakness associated with other medical conditions.

Many people think that Occupational Therapy is just to help people return to a job or to work. Actually, the “occupation” in Occupational Therapy refers to all everyday life activities, from jobs to hobbies to taking care of yourself. According to the National Occupational Therapy Association, Occupational Therapists can “help you participate in life activities and make recommendations for activities of daily living (such as bathing, dressing, and eating); adaptive equipment (such as shower chairs, or equipment to make daily tasks easier); caregiver and family training; planning and making the most of your daily routines; returning to work, school, and leisure activities; techniques to aid in memory, concentration and executive functioning (thinking and reasoning); as well as falls prevention and home safety and accessibility.” Occupational Therapists use a combination of exercises for strengthening, stretching, coordination, and balance along with practicing tasks in meaningful and engaging ways and introducing equipment and techniques that allow a person to return to doing the things in their daily lives that are meaningful to them.



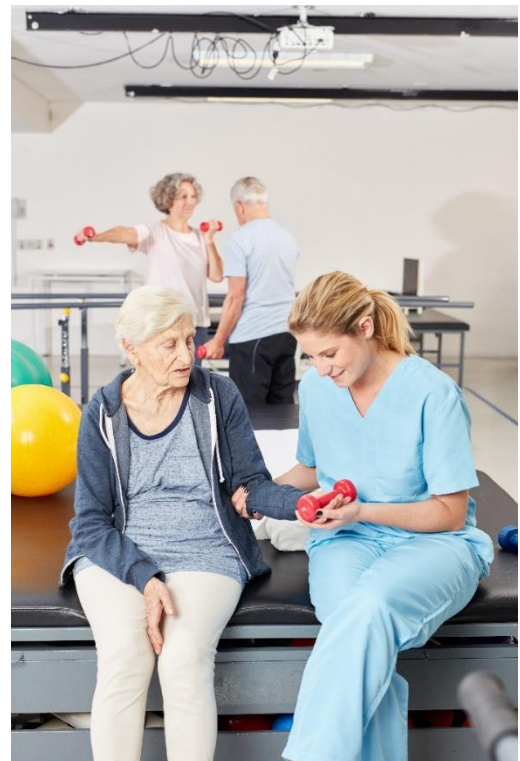
Speech-language Pathologists treat more than just problems with speaking. They also address problems related to hearing, comprehending spoken and written language, thinking and problem solving, as well as issues related to eating and swallowing. These issues could be the result of a condition with a sudden start, like a stroke or brain injury, or a more long-term, ongoing conditions like Parkinson's Disease or dementia.

When Is It Time to Seek Out Therapy?

When it comes to deciding when to involve therapy in your plans for independence, it's always good to think that earlier is better.

Therapists can provide valuable education and insight as well as effective exercise and wellness plans to prevent injury and avoid further complications from known challenges and medical conditions. Therapists can be effective in treating both acute (sudden, short-term problems) and chronic (long-term, ongoing problems) medical conditions. If someone is experiencing ongoing issues with pain, particularly if it is limiting their ability to get around, therapists can work on an outpatient or home health basis to address the root of the pain while working to restore the patient's ability to move around.

Therapists can also be involved in treating acute injuries, working with a physician to develop a plan to improve strength and flexibility in the injured part of the body while ensuring further complications do not develop in other areas. Therapists are an essential part of the team when someone is recovering from various things that can lead to a hospital stay and afterward, whether it's a stroke, injury from a fall, or a medical issue that has led to weakness, like pneumonia or a heart attack. Therapists provide a wide



range of treatments, from strengthening and stretching exercises to hands-on training in mobility and walking to activities to counter problems with balance, coordination, and endurance. The focus of therapy will not always be physical but could extend to issues in communication, thinking, and reasoning. There could also be times when therapists can be helpful in meeting your goals by learning new ways to do the things you want to do, whether that's through task simplification or the help of an assistive device or technology.



In What Settings Can I Receive Therapy?

Rehabilitation therapy services are provided in almost every form of medical setting, from inpatient settings like acute care hospitals, rehab hospitals, and skilled nursing facilities to outpatient and home-based settings. The focus and amount of therapy as well as the coverage by insurance varies by setting so it's important to have a good understanding of each to shape your expectations and know how each fit into your personal plan for independence.

Physical and Occupational Therapy services as well as those for Speech and Language Pathology are typically available in the hospital setting. As changes in our health care delivery system continue to occur, stays in hospitals get shorter and shorter. This means that the role of therapists has also changed,

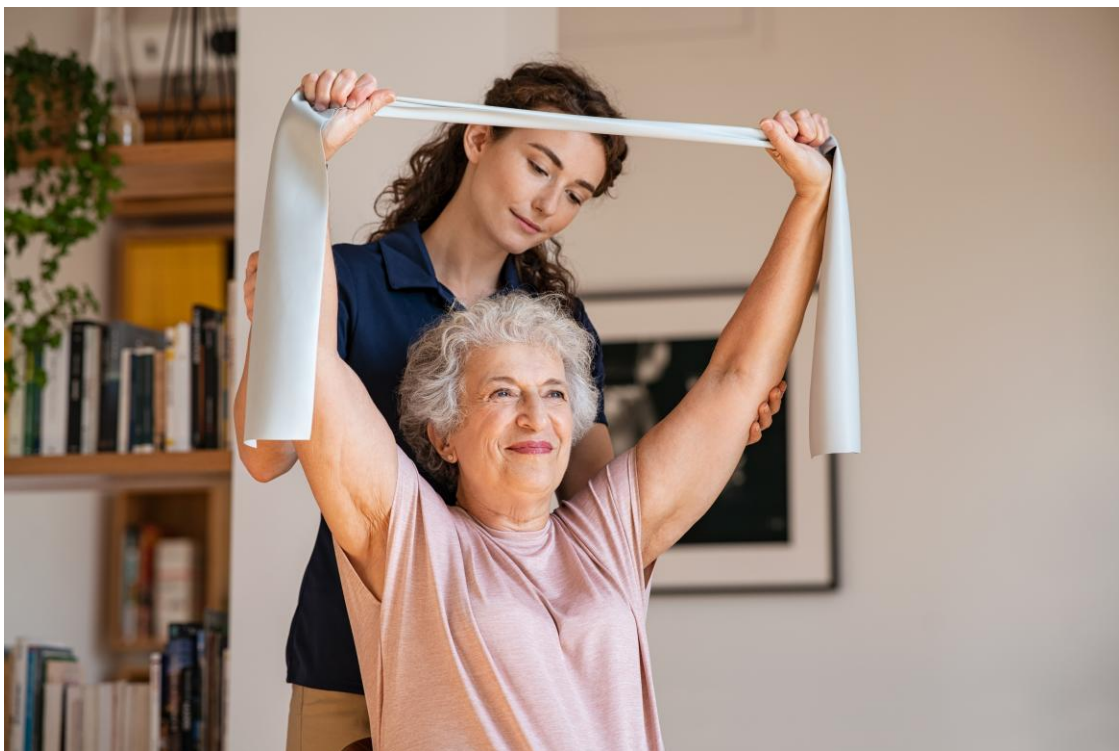
creating greater emphasis on evaluating a patient's ability to get around and recommending the most appropriate setting for the next step in the patient's recovery, whether home with home health or outpatient services or to another facility like a rehab hospital or skilled nursing facility. Because of the shorter stays and more of therapists' time spent evaluating and making recommendations, the amount of time spent with a therapist in the hospital can be extremely limited. There may be times that you and your loved ones will need to be assertive in insisting on getting out of bed and moving around in the hospital, whether that's with the help of a therapist or other staff. It is also important that you speak up and let your case manager and therapist know about your goals for achieving the highest level of independence and your willingness to work to achieve



those goals. Ageist assumptions can sometimes be made by those planning for your therapy services after a hospitalization. Discharge planners may assume because of your age that you can't tolerate a certain amount of therapy or that goals of returning to independence are not realistic. Always insist that the setting being recommended provides your best chance for achieving your goals.

After a hospitalization, if you are unable to return home, the next step in recovery through therapy involves a stay in a rehab hospital or skilled nursing facility (SNF), sometimes referred to as a nursing home. All three therapy disciplines are provided in both settings but there are different benefits for each level of care. Rehab hospitals provide the most therapy and physician involvement and usually result in the quickest return home. They provide the

highest intensity of therapy, which means greatest amount of therapy provided, not how hard the therapy is that's provided. The treatment provided by therapy in rehab hospitals is still tailored to the unique needs and tolerance of each patient. Physicians typically see their patients on a more frequent, sometimes daily, basis in a rehab hospital compared to a SNF. Conversely, the amount of therapy provided daily and overall is less in a skilled nursing facility, an intensity that may be more appropriate for some who need a slower pace of recovery. Stays in a skilled nursing facility are typically longer than those in a rehab hospital, which could be seen negatively for someone wanting to return home quickly but positively for someone who may need more time to achieve their goals and arrange for the resources needed at home.



It should be noted that there may be situations where it is appropriate for someone to be admitted to a rehab hospital directly from home and not after a hospital stay. If a patient has been home but has a need for more therapy and medical management than can be provided from home health or outpatient services, a stay in a rehab hospital may be warranted without

having to go to the acute care hospital first. If you feel this may be your case, discuss it with your home health or outpatient therapist and ask them to make a referral to the rehab hospital or reach out to the rehab hospital directly.

Traditional Medicare plans cover stays in both settings and it is left up to the rehab hospital or skilled nursing facility to decide if a patient meets criteria for admission. For Medicare Advantage plans and commercial insurance plans, insurance plans control the decision more and the preferred path for many plans is a stay in a SNF over a rehab hospital due to the perception that the SNF stay will cost less for the insurance company. This may be another situation where you and your loved ones must advocate for what you believe is the best level of care for success in meeting your goals. That might even mean filing appeals with your insurance if they are unwilling to approve the level of care you and your therapist feel you need. Many insurance companies are more responsive to the appeals of patients and families than they are for appeals from healthcare providers.

If you have a need for therapy services outside of an inpatient facility, home health or outpatient therapy can be considered. As with inpatient settings, there are different benefits and criteria for each service. If you are unable to leave your home (or even if you can but it requires a great deal of energy and is difficult to do), home health will likely be the most appropriate setting. The obvious benefit of home health therapy is that the therapist comes to your home, meaning you can put your energy into working with therapy and not getting out of the house and traveling to an appointment. In addition, it can be very helpful for a therapist to see your home environment firsthand, creating a plan to address your specific needs based on how your home



is set up as well as what you want to do in the home and how you want to go about doing it.

Outpatient therapy involves receiving services in an office/gym setting. This setting is going to have more equipment and technology available to be used with therapy than in the home health setting. In addition, the therapy sessions in an outpatient setting are often longer than those in the home health setting. If you have a need for more than just one therapy service, it will likely mean that your therapy will be scheduled on the same day in an outpatient setting. Depending on your perspective and endurance level, this can be seen as a positive while some may prefer to have the different kinds of therapy scheduled on different days, which may be more common with the home health setting.



As with other therapy settings, being familiar with your insurance benefits is important for both home health and outpatient settings. Do you have a co-pay associated with each therapy visit? Is it different if that visit is provided through home health versus outpatient? As with an inpatient setting, prior approval by an insurance plan is not required for home health or outpatient therapy services for patients that have traditional Medicare instead of a Medicare Advantage Plan. Talk to your therapist about how many visits are

typically covered by your insurance. Just because your insurance company says you have a certain number of visits per year does not mean they will continue to approve visits for a particular condition up to that point. For many continuing therapy after returning home from the hospital, home health may be the next step in recovery due to the continued challenge of leaving your house. But after a few weeks, many can “graduate” to an outpatient setting, effectively using their insurance benefits for both settings appropriately.

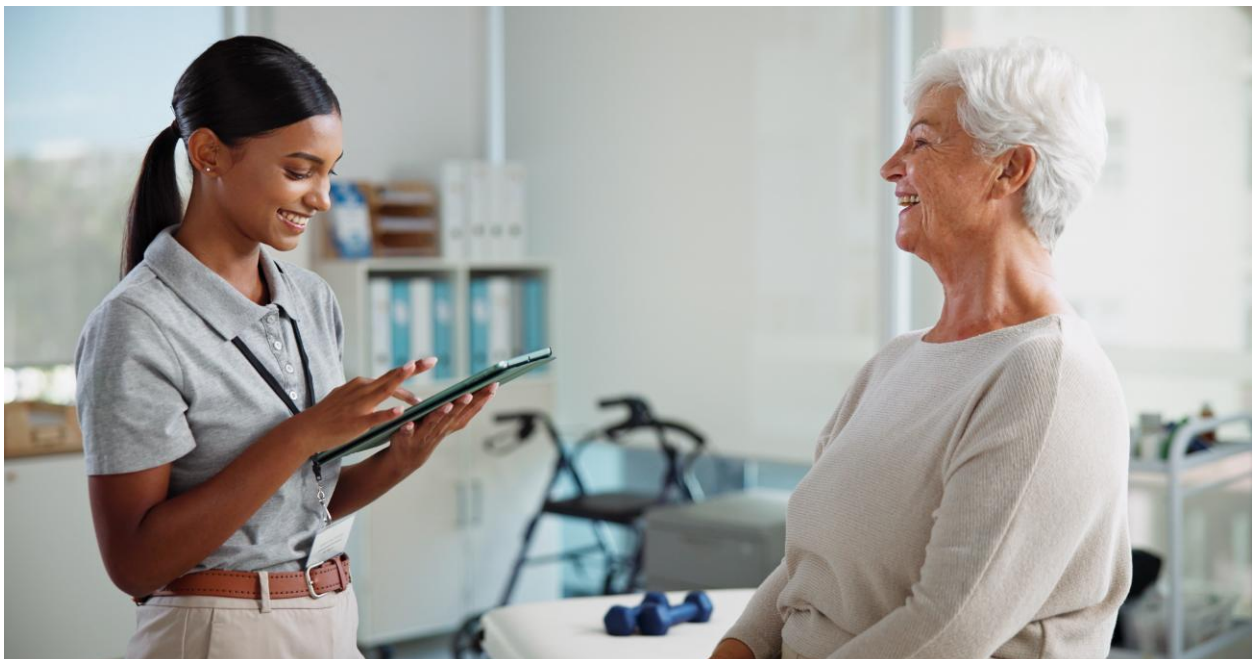


Residents in senior living typically have access to therapy services that are provided within the building where they live. This may be through home health services, outpatient services, or a combination of both. As a therapy patient, you always maintain the right to decide what therapy provider you choose. At the same time, many facilities have an established relationship with certain therapy providers due to the provider’s history of superior outcomes and greater level of teamwork with the staff at the senior living facility. Because of that relationship, they may be able to work with the senior living team to provide the most effective treatment plan given your insurance coverage. The important point is to speak up, ask questions, and understand your benefits. Make sure decisions are made based on what’s best for you as the patient and not what is most convenient or beneficial for everyone else.

Your Role and Responsibilities as a Patient

Getting the maximum benefit from therapy does not involve being a passive receiver of these services. Getting the most out of therapy requires you to take an active role in several important ways. No matter how knowledgeable or skilled a therapist is, they cannot *make* a patient get better or get stronger. It takes your commitment and participation as the patient to achieve your goals for independence and wellbeing.

Your first responsibility in ensuring the success of your therapy is clearly communicating your challenges, needs, and goals for therapy. Don't assume that a therapist knows everything about your history. Be willing to be assertive and clear about your goals and expectations for therapy. Let the therapist know what you feel you need to be able to do to live at your most independent level. Make sure they are aware of your available resources. Challenge them to be creative to meet your goals – If you can't achieve your goals doing something the way you used to do it, what new ways can be identified with new equipment or technology? Ensure that the goals that are established by the therapist include your input and address the things that are a priority for you.



The next responsibility you have is “do your homework.” While the time you have with a therapist is important, the greatest gains will be achieved through the work you do between sessions. A big part of what the therapist will likely do is establish a home exercise program that addresses the areas where you want to improve. It is essential that you do these exercises on a consistent basis as directed by your therapist. Relying only on your time in therapy sessions to make progress will not prove to be successful. Pushing yourself to apply what you’ve learned on the days in between is a key to success.

Include your loved ones and caregivers in the process. The old saying “two heads are better than one” is definitely true when it comes to being successful with your therapy. The benefits of family and caregiver involvement include ensuring consistency outside of therapy as well as providing encouragement and



accountability. Have your loved ones or caregivers be involved with any education that the therapist provides so they can ensure you are doing things the same way at home. Ask for written material to ensure everyone stays on the same page with what’s expected. You may even consider taking a video on your phone of any instructions provided by therapy so that you can share with loved ones or caregivers.

Taking to heart the education and feedback that your therapist provides is also important. This goes beyond doing your home exercise program and includes things like adopting lifestyle changes such as activity level and diet, using certain safety precautions, appropriate use of assistive devices, and changes to your home setup when needed. The benefits seen with therapy will be short lived without making the necessary adjustments at home for long term success.



A frequently overlooked responsibility of people considering therapy is knowing your insurance benefits for therapy services. Unfortunately, insurance coverage and financial restraints can be a challenge to how long and how often you receive therapy. It's important that you are familiar with what your insurance plan will pay for. What providers are considered "in network" with your insurance plan? Is there a co-pay associated with therapy services? How does coverage differ between settings like home health versus outpatient? If your time with therapy will be limited by insurance coverage, how can you and your therapist maximize this time? If insurance coverage is limited, will the therapy provider provide discounts for those who are willing to pay out of pocket? If you are going to consider paying out of pocket, don't hesitate to shop around and ask multiple providers what they typically charge. As important as it is that you are involved in setting your goals and priorities for therapy, it is equally important you and your therapist are on the same page with your insurance coverage and your financial situation.

In the end, you are the captain of your therapy team. Your needs and goals should remain at the center of all you do with therapy. If you feel what you are

doing in therapy is not working towards those goals, ask questions. Many times, therapists work with patients on certain activities that are “building blocks” for progressing towards your goals but the connection may not be obvious to the patient. Question your therapist in these situations so you can gain an understanding. If progress seems slow at first, don’t give up! Sometimes it takes a little time to build a foundation with therapy before you really start to see the benefits. With hard work, the support of your loved ones and caregivers, and the direction of your therapists, you can achieve your goals and return to doing the things you love!

About the Author - Scott Rowe, PT

Scott Rowe is an experienced physical therapist and former rehabilitation hospital executive. He is a community leader and advocate for older adults and became Project Director of the Bounce Back Project because he believes in the mission of helping people maximize their potential through restorative techniques.

As a therapist, Scott has years of experience helping elders regain functional independence after a setback. Scott believes that when physicians, caregivers, and families support the work done in therapy, older adults can often return to their former level of functioning and reclaim lives of meaning and purpose.

