



What is a Physiatrist?

A physiatrist (fizz ee at' trist) is a physician specializing in physical medicine and rehabilitation. Physiatrists treat a wide range of problems from sore shoulders to spinal cord injuries. They see patients in all age groups and treat problems that touch upon all the major systems in the body. These specialists focus on restoring function to people.

To become a physiatrist, individuals must successfully complete four years of graduate medical education and four additional years of postdoctoral residency training. Residency training includes one year spent developing fundamental clinical skills and three additional years of training in the full scope of the specialty.

There are 79 accredited residency programs in physical medicine and rehabilitation in the United States. Many physiatrists choose to pursue additional advanced degrees (MS, PhD) or complete fellowship training in a specific area of the specialty. Fellowships are available for specialized study in such areas as musculoskeletal rehabilitation, pediatrics, traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, and sports medicine.

To become board-certified in physical medicine and rehabilitation, physiatrists are required to pass both a written and oral examination administered by the American Board of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (ABPM&R). The ABPM&R also has agreements with each of the boards of pediatrics, internal medicine, and neurology to allow special training programs leading to certification in both specialties.

Physiatrists treat acute and chronic pain and musculoskeletal disorders. They may see a person who lifts a heavy object at work and experiences back pain, a basketball player who sprains an ankle and needs rehabilitation to play again, or a knitter who has carpal tunnel syndrome. Physiatrists' patients include people with arthritis, tendonitis, any kind of back pain, and work- or sports-related injuries.

Physiatrists also treat serious disorders of the musculoskeletal system that result in severe functional limitations. They would treat a baby with a birth defect, someone in a bad car accident, or an elderly person with a broken hip. Physiatrists coordinate the long-term rehabilitation process for patients with spinal cord injuries, cancer, stroke or other neurological disorders, brain injuries, amputations, and multiple sclerosis.

Physiatrists practice in rehabilitation centers, hospitals, and in private offices. They often have broad practices, but some concentrate on one area such as pediatrics, sports medicine, geriatric medicine, brain injury, or many other special interests.



Why Choose a Physiatrist?

Physiatrists are specialists in diagnosing and treating problems of the musculoskeletal system. They perform thorough histories and physical examinations to find the source of your pain, injury or disability, even when standard diagnostic tests don't reveal specific problems.

In addition, physiatrists direct your treatment team. If you need any other services, such as those of a physical therapist or athletic trainer, your physiatrist supervises, collaborates with and coordinates the other health care professionals. The result is a specially designed treatment program tailored for you.

Because physiatrists offer an aggressive, non-surgical approach to pain and injury, these physicians are the ideal choice for the treatment of a wide variety of diseases and conditions. Here's a listing of just some of the conditions that physiatrists have extensive training in diagnosing and treating:

- Amputations
- Low back pain
- Neck pain
- Fibromyalgia/Myofascial Pain/Chronic Pain
- Spinal cord injuries
- Brain injuries
- Arthritis
- Cancer
- Burns
- Stroke and Neurological Disorders
- Multiple Sclerosis (information forthcoming)
- Cardiac Disorders
- Osteoporosis
- Musculoskeletal Disorders
- Work injuries

Most importantly, physiatrists treat the whole patient, not just the patient's symptoms. Physiatrists share their medical knowledge to help patients understand their condition and provide the tools and resources to manage it. They employ a variety of treatment methods to reduce or eliminate your problems and to decrease the possibility of a recurrence. This comprehensive approach produces not only cost-effective results, but also a high degree of patient satisfaction.

Through integrated focused care and comprehensive diagnosis and treatment, physiatrists add quality to the lives of millions of patients each year. The goal: getting you back into the game – not just back on the sidelines.



Frequently asked questions.

How do physiatrists diagnose?

Physiatrists' diagnostic tools are the same as those used by other physicians, with the addition of special techniques in electrodiagnostic medicine like electromyography (EMG), nerve conduction studies, and somatosensory evoked potentials. These techniques help the physiatrist to diagnose conditions that cause pain, weakness, and numbness.

What kinds of treatments do physiatrists offer?

Physiatrists offer a broad spectrum of medical services. They do not perform surgery. Physiatrists may prescribe drugs or assistive devices, such as a brace or artificial limb. They also use diverse therapies such as heat and cold, electrotherapies, massage, biofeedback, traction, and therapeutic exercise.

Where do physiatrists practice?

Physiatrists practice in rehabilitation centers, hospitals, and in private offices. They often have broad practices, but some concentrate on one area such as pediatrics, sports medicine, geriatric medicine, brain injury, and many other special interests.

What kinds of differences do physiatrists make?

Since physiatrists focus on restoring patients to maximum function, the difference they make can be dramatic. In the case of the herniated disc, the physiatrist not only takes care of the acute problem, but also treats the patient until he or she returns to optimal functioning, usually without surgery. The physiatrist also teaches the patient how to prevent the injury in the future.

A broken hip in an elderly patient is another example. Physiatrists can provide aggressive rehabilitation so patients can walk and even exercise again. And because the physiatrist is concerned with all areas of rehabilitation – social, vocational, and medical – the quality of life is significantly increased for patients.