



What is the Role of a PTA?

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The role of a PTA:

“Why am I being seen by an aide? Am I not important enough for the full attention of a PT?” While the roles in a clinic can be confusing, there is in fact a difference between a PTA and a PT aide. A PT aide is a trained on the job position that does not require further education, and is able to assist with simple tasks under direct supervision of a PT or PTA such as basic exercises, using ice or heat, or getting into position for the therapist to perform a more advanced treatment. A PTA has strict education requirements, and is a trained and licensed professional able to carry out a full treatment.

The first time you work with a PTA it could be a bit confusing as to who is seeing you and if it is truly quality care. With health insurance and medical costs today it is always a toss up on whether the cost is worth the results you see, or the time spent with the professional, so it is understandable and, in fact, recommended that you do a thorough check on who you are seeing to be sure your needs are appropriately met.

A PTA works under the direction and supervision of a licensed Physical Therapist. The professional organization, the American Physical Therapy Association or APTA, states that a PTA implements select components of patient treatments, obtains data related to the treatment plan, and makes modifications to the treatments to progress or ensure safety of the patient as directed by the primary PT. Ultimately, the PTA's job is to perform treatments within the plan of care and goals established by the patient and Physical Therapist as safely and effectively as possible.

A PTA requires an AAS, associates of applied science, degree with graduation from an accredited PTA program. A typical program outline requires extensive anatomy, exercise physiology, pathophysiology, and kinesiology classes as applied to physical therapy treatments

and interventions. Integrated into the program is 16 weeks of full time clinical internships and various settings with a PT or PTA mentor who provides further education and feedback on providing quality care, and areas of improvement. Following graduation from a program there is a national standard licensure examination that requires a broad base of knowledge on the human body and clinical thinking skills in order to pass.

Where the education and treatments may look differently between seeing a PTA and a PT is that if there is a change in the plan, the PTA would consult with the PT and have them step in to ensure that the goals are still appropriate. For example, you are being seen following a surgical repair to your rotator cuff and come in after 6 weeks of rehab and tell the PTA that you fell last night, slipping on the ice (yikes!) and landed on your outstretched surgical arm; felt a sharp pain and a pop and you are still having pain. The appropriate action from the PTA would be to put a hold on the current exercise program, discuss the new event with the PT, and have them perform special testing and a screening to ensure the integrity of the repair is maintained. After ensuring there was no serious injury, your exercise would resume at a reduced intensity to prevent increases in pain, and implement ice or other pain control modalities as needed. That is just one example of an effective PT/PTA team approach and in no way reduces the quality of treatment you as the patient would be receiving.

In summation, if you see a PTA for treatments you are not being 'pawnd off' in any way. You will still be getting constant insight from a PT, and seen fully by a PT for the initial evaluation, for progress updates prior to visits with your physician, and every 6th visit per Medicare requirements. If the PTA you are working with encounters something more advanced that requires a PT's more in-depth knowledge, the PTA will consult with the PT. As a professional in the physical therapy field, the focus is always on your safety, healthy progression towards goals, and ultimately your safe return to your favorite Montana activities.



Abbey Filler, PTA

Abbey earned her degree as a Physical Therapist Assistant from Flathead Valley Community College in her home town of Kalispell, Montana. She has a variety of experiences including in-patient acute care, subacute neurological rehabilitation, and outpatient orthopedic patient care. Prior to becoming a PTA, Abbey was a certified personal trainer, and enjoyed helping clients reach their fitness goals. She plans to continue to expand her knowledge base by attending continuing education courses in a variety of topics.