

# PHYSICAL & OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Physical therapy (PT) and occupational therapy (OT) are related yet distinct health care professions. Both PTs and OTs work to maintain and improve the physical and mental health and fitness of their patients, and often work together. However, where PTs help ensure the maximum movement and functional ability of a patient with a disability or after a trauma, OTs help people with limitations and disabilities to independently accomplish their daily activities and provide basic self-care. Put another way, **PTs work to restore movement and mobility** (e.g., helping people stand, reach and walk) and **OT's work to restore function** (e.g., helping people dress, bathe and feed themselves or to engage in their jobs or hobbies). PTs and OTs work in a variety of professional settings – hospitals, private practice, rehabilitation centers, schools, etc. – assisting patients from infancy to old age with both mental and physical diseases and injuries.

Physical therapists earn a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree from an accredited three-year long program and pass a national licensing exam. A small number of accredited Master of Physical Therapy (MPT) programs exist, but the DPT will be the required degree for licensure starting in 2015. To gain the depth of knowledge and training needed for PT practice in the future, pursue a DPT.

Graduating from an accredited Master of Occupational Therapy (MOT) program (typically two years long) and passing the national licensing exam is required for occupational therapists. Though a doctoral degree is not required for practice, students interested in OT research, policy or education careers may want to consider the Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) three-year degree program.

Explore the education and career sections of the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA – [www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org)) and American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA – [www.aota.org](http://www.aota.org)) websites for more detailed career information and lists of accredited schools. Also visit [www.ExploreHealthCareers.org](http://www.ExploreHealthCareers.org) for current job outlook and salary information and to investigate rehabilitation therapy, kinesiology, athletic training, podiatry, sports medicine, mental health and other related fields. The PT/OT page on [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu) has additional resources to prepare and apply for these programs.

## GET EXPERIENCE

Confirm your interest in the field and develop the skills needed to be a PT or OT through exposure and experience. Talk with or observe a PT or OT. Find therapists through your network of friends and family, by volunteering in a hospital or other clinical facility, contacting PT/OT schools, or by involvement in a professional association (APTA or AOTA) or a pre-PT/OT or pre-health student organization ([getinvolved.ucsd.edu](http://getinvolved.ucsd.edu)). Many schools stress the importance of a variety of clinical experiences, including those available at large hospitals, clinics, group practices and rehabilitation centers, and may expect a minimum of 100+ hours of PT/OT or health care related experience. Find opportunities at [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu).

Engaging in extracurricular activities – internships, volunteering, organizations, jobs, etc. – allows you to develop skills transferrable to your future career like communication, problem-solving, creativity, compassion and caring, interpersonal abilities and more. These experiences are also great ways to get to know people to write letters of recommendation. Be sure to keep track of when, where and for how long you participated for your future applications.

## PREPARE ACADEMICALLY

There is no required or preferred major for PT/OT preparation. You should study subjects you do well in and enjoy. PT and OT programs typically require a minimum GPA of 3.0, but the GPA of admitted students at some schools may be much higher. Do your best. An upward trend in your GPA looks good.

You will need to take certain pre-requisite science and social science classes for admission. Pre-requisites vary widely from school to school, so check with each school for their particular requirements. Common pre-requisites include:

- General Biology with Lab (BILD 1&2 + one bio lab)
- Human Anatomy & Physiology with Lab (not offered at UCSD, try SDSU or community colleges)
- General Chemistry with Lab (CHEM 6A,B,C & 7L)
- Physics with lab (PHYS 1 or 2 series)
- Psychology and/or Sociology (2-5 courses)
- Statistics (MATH 11 or PSYCH 60)
- Writing/Composition/Literature (usually satisfied by your college writing requirement)

Additional required or recommended courses may include microbiology, cell biology, organic chemistry, exercise science/kinesiology, math, oral communication, biochemistry, nutrition, human development, health, and humanities. Be flexible – not all required courses are offered at UCSD and may need to be taken elsewhere.

## APPLY TO SCHOOLS

Application for PT/OT programs typically occurs in the early fall, one year before you want to start the program. Programs which admit students for non-fall start dates may have alternative timelines. Check with your intended programs for specifics and submit your complete application well before the deadlines – earlier in the cycle is better. Apply when you have the strongest application – consider waiting to apply until after you graduate to confirm your interest in the field, gain more experience, build your GPA and get to know letter writers.

**Choose Schools** – Most students apply to between five and seven PT or OT programs. Select schools based on your competitiveness, the degree offered, the curriculum and training facilities, the schools' reputation with PT/OT professionals, location, cost, licensure exam passage rates, and job placement history. Find lists of schools at [www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org) (PT) and [www.aota.org](http://www.aota.org) (OT).

**The Applications** – For many schools, you will use the Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service ([www.PTCAS.org](http://www.PTCAS.org)) or Occupational Therapist Centralized Application Service ([www.OTCAS.org](http://www.OTCAS.org)). These services compile your transcripts, essays, letters, experience and test scores together to make the process easier for you and the schools. Schools using these services may also ask for school-specific supplemental applications. Review school websites carefully for particulars. For programs that don't participate in PT/OTCAS, apply directly on their websites.

Detailed guides and resources for preparing and completing your applications can be found on the PT/OT page at [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu). Some steps take longer than others to prepare – plan ahead! Applications may include:

- **Transcripts** – To evaluate your academic record, the application services/schools will require you to submit official transcripts from every college and university you've attended – even unrelated course-work you took at community colleges in high school. Contact registrars' offices at your schools for details ([registrar.ucsd.edu](http://registrar.ucsd.edu)).
- **GRE Scores** – The Graduate Record Exam tests your verbal, quantitative and writing skills and is offered year-round at computer testing centers. You can take the GRE much earlier to allow time to retake the exam, but plan to complete it at least one month before your deadlines to receive your scores in time. Find preparation materials and learn more at [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org).
- **Letters of Recommendation** – Obtain letters from 2-4 professors and professionals who know you well and can comment with detail about your skills, preparation and suitability for a career in PT/OT. Get to know potential writers over time – don't wait until you're applying to talk to professors! See [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu) for details.
- **Personal Statement** – Your application essay should describe in detail the things you have done – classes, volunteering, internships, jobs, etc. – that have helped you develop the skills, interest and motivation for a PT/OT education and career. Have PT/OT professionals and people you trust read and critique your essay. Prep guides, books with sample essays and an essay critique service are available in the Career Services Center.
- **Experience** – PT/OTCAS and school applications will ask you to list and describe your extracurricular involvements. Give detailed accounts of your activities. They only know what you tell them, so show how you've used your time and developed transferrable skills. Include all activities – not just PT/OT related ones.
- **Interviews** – Interviews are your chance to demonstrate your communication and people skills, passion for PT/OT and interest in that school. It is also an opportunity for you to investigate the program and see if it meets your expectations. Prepare and practice with Career Services Center workshops and online resources.

**Financial Aid** – PT and OT programs are a significant investment of time and money. The financial aid offices at the PT/OT schools are your primary source for information about paying for school – ask about loans, grants and scholarships they might provide. Consult APTA and AOTA for scholarships and financial aid information. And see the Financial Aid & Fellowships section of [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu) for guidance and links to loan and scholarship opportunities.

The Career Services Center offers written guides, web resources, workshops and books on preparing and applying for health professional school. The Health Professional School Fair in Spring Quarter brings representatives from PT/OT programs to campus to meet with interested students. Visit [career.ucsd.edu](http://career.ucsd.edu) or come into the Center for details and further assistance. Advisors are available by appointment to discuss individual concerns.