

Physiotherapy and back pain

- ◆ Physiotherapy is a science-based healthcare profession that views movement as central to health and wellbeing.
- ◆ Physiotherapists offer advice and a range of physical treatments to help people make the most of their movement ability and promote health
- ◆ Physiotherapy has a long history of treating back pain
- ◆ Physiotherapy is available within the NHS and in the private sector

What is physiotherapy?

Physiotherapists aim to help people make the most of their movement ability by promoting health, offering advice and a range of physical treatments. The most common treatments used by physiotherapists are:

- ◆ Advice – top tips for self-help and prevention of future episodes of back pain
- ◆ Exercise – stretching, strengthening, core stability
- ◆ Manual therapy – manipulation, mobilisation, soft tissue techniques eg massage
- ◆ Electrotherapy – TENS, ultrasound, biofeedback
- ◆ Hydrotherapy - exercising in a warm pool.
- ◆ Acupuncture

As well as assessing your physical health, physiotherapists consider it is vital to take note of psychological, cultural and social factors that can influence back pain. They believe it is important to look at the whole person, taking into account previous medical history, work and lifestyle, before making a diagnosis and devising a treatment programme, tailored to your needs.

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Since the profession was founded in 1894, physiotherapists have had a history of successfully treating people with back pain and they treat people of all ages and abilities. They will undertake an initial assessment, which involves asking questions about your symptoms, looking at how you move and they may examine your joints, muscles and other tissues. At the end of the assessment, your physiotherapist will explain what they have found openly and honestly and you will have the chance to ask any questions. They will then discuss the range of treatments (some of which are listed above) that may be available and will help you to understand and consider the benefits, risks and any alternatives. Depending on your symptoms, a course of physiotherapy will often involve four-six treatments.

Where do physiotherapists work?

Chartered physiotherapists work in various settings including hospitals, health centres, doctors' surgeries, private clinics, work places, schools, and in the community.

There are three main ways to access physiotherapy in the UK: the National Health Service (NHS), private practitioners, and the independent healthcare sector.

NHS:

In most cases, you will first need to make an appointment with your doctor and then ask to be referred to a physiotherapist. Onward referral will be at the discretion of your doctor. In some parts of the UK, you may be able to self-refer to see a physiotherapist (you can check with your local hospital to see if this is possible).

Private practitioners:

If you wish to pay for your treatment, there are many physiotherapists across the UK offering treatment in dedicated physiotherapy and sports clinics, as well as many who will treat people in their own homes. To find a local private practitioner, you can either search BackCare's online professional directory at www.backcare.org.uk or the online directory 'physio2u' on the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy website www.csp.org.uk or alternatively, access the Private Practitioners' Occupational Group, called Physiofirst (www.physiofirst.org.uk).

The independent sector:

Many private medical insurance schemes in the independent healthcare sector offer physiotherapy treatment. If you have private medical cover it is worth checking what your scheme specifically provides, as policies do vary.

Some large employers run occupational health schemes for their staff that may include physiotherapy treatment. Your human resources department should be able to advise on whether your employer offers such a scheme and how you might access it.

How qualified are physiotherapists?

Being a chartered physiotherapist means your clinician will have undertaken at least three years training and achieved the high standard required to become a member of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP). They will have either: MCSP (member of the CSP); FCSP (fellow of the CSP) and / or SRP (standing for state registered physiotherapist) after their name.

How are physiotherapists regulated?

All physiotherapists working in the UK will be registered with the regulatory body for physiotherapists: the Health Professions Council (HPC). This is an independent UK-wide health regulator for 13 different professions, including physiotherapy.

If you opt for private treatment, make sure you see a chartered and / or state registered physiotherapist / physical therapist. This guarantees that:

- ◆ Their qualification is recognised
- ◆ They are governed by a professional code of conduct
- ◆ They are covered by professional liability insurance.

The titles 'physiotherapist' and 'physical therapist' have been protected by law since 2005. This means that only physiotherapists registered with the HPC will be allowed to use either of these two titles when practising. All physiotherapists are listed on the HPC website and you can check this listing via www.hpc-uk.org.

Further information

1. The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy www.csp.org.uk Tel: 020 7306 6666
2. The Health Professions Council www.hpc-uk.org. Tel: 020 7840 9806
3. Physiofirst www.physiofirst.org.uk Tel: 01327 354 441
4. NHS Direct www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk