

It may well be the long-elusive “fountain of youth.” Research offers compelling evidence that positive lifestyle change—most notably exercise—can greatly enhance the way we age. The latest research shows not only the health benefits of regular exercise, but also the profound negative consequences of not exercising. With exercise, we can significantly reduce or prevent the effects of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, osteoporosis, arthritis, depression, and some forms of cancer. Exercise can also help in weight loss and management, in turn reducing our risk of many diseases.

It sounds simple enough: By incorporating regular exercise into our lifestyles we greatly increase our potential to remain healthy and independent into old age. But for many people, getting started can be anything but simple. Finding a safe, effective, and enjoyable exercise program—especially as we get older—often requires the help of an expert. Physical therapists are the health care professionals with the most to offer.

### Senior Wellness: New Practice Opportunities for Physical Therapists

At a rate of 5,574 per day, more than 2 million Americans celebrated their 65th birthday in 2000. America’s older population (65+) numbered 35 million in 2000, an increase of 3.7 million since 1990. The number of Americans ages 45 to 64—the “baby boomers” who will reach 65 during the next two decades—increased by 34% during this past decade. By the year 2030, the older population will more than double to about 70 million.

These statistics from the Administration on Aging give us compelling reasons to evaluate how we have traditionally viewed aging in America. Research shows that exercise benefits can be reaped at any age. There are also many

# Senior Wellness

In an ever-changing health care environment, new practice arenas continue to emerge for physical therapists. The patient/client populations you serve, along with the settings in which you serve them, offer new and expanding opportunities for the provision of physical therapy. The American Physical Therapy Association brings members this “Emerging PT Practice” Series to provide information on new practice arenas that offer potential for advancing careers and serving the public. In Number 11 of the Series, we invite you to explore the new opportunities available in the area of senior wellness

research studies that document the effectiveness of fitness programs for seniors, showing that many diseases and loss of function can be prevented.

More than a decade ago, the medical community began to take notice of such landmark studies as Fiaterone’s 1990 finding in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* showing that with resistance training, people at the age of 90+ could have significant gains in strength. Since then there has been a wealth of literature supporting the importance of health promotion programs for seniors. Physical therapists have been important contributors to this literature. Among the most notable has been Wolf’s<sup>2</sup> study in the

early 1990s that showed the significant value of tai chi exercise programs in preventing falls in the elderly.

As the medical community studied the effects of exercise on aging populations, it wasn’t long before the general public took notice. The release of the US Surgeon General’s *Healthy People 2000* made health promotion an undeniable priority for the American public. Chief among the report’s goals is to “Preserve independent functioning in older adults.” This goal was further supported in the more recent *Healthy People 2010* report, in which a number of objectives outlined the importance of exercise and wellness for seniors. America’s seniors are

starting fitness programs in record numbers. As they do, they are also seeking the guidance of professionals.

### Why PTs Are Ideally Suited

APTA’s *Position on Physical Therapy for Older Adults* (HOD 06-95-08) states, “Health and wellness promotion and preventive programs should be supported for the older adult to prevent or delay the development of many chronic problems which often result in the utilization of more costly services. Such programs should include a physical therapy component.”

Physical therapists have the expertise to prescribe individualized, safe, and effective exercise programs for older clients who may have a number of complicating health factors, such as osteoporosis, arthritis, joint replacement, diabetes, hypertension, and deconditioning. PTs can make appropriate modifications that are not typically within the expertise of a fitness trainer. PTs can also make appropriate referrals when they detect a serious medical condition.

“With older adults, there is a fine line between enough exercise and too much exercise, between enough reps and too many reps,” says one PT with experience in senior wellness. “Too many health clubs across the country are still providing ‘one-size-fits-all’ exercise programs. They are not aware that certain exercises are contraindicated. For instance, the rotator cuff loses its blood supply as we get older, making it common to see tears in older people. Yet I’ve seen trainers put older clients on overhead presses.” Also, according to the National Osteoporosis Foundation, more than 55% of people over the age of 50 either have, or are at risk for, osteoporosis. Flexion exercises are contraindicated for people with osteoporosis. Yet senior clientele in fitness centers are often instructed in abdominal

strengthening and other flexion-type exercises that put them at risk for serious injury.

Says another PT, "I've visited gyms across the country to inquire about their senior fitness programs only to find that what differentiates the programs is a senior discount, or merely a slower pace of exercise. As a result, the older client is intimidated, gets hurt, and gives up. Physical therapists evaluate a client's fitness ability and interests, starting the client at an appropriate level so that he or she will realize gains safely."

### Is This Area of Practice Right for You?

Physical therapists in all practice settings have the qualifications to develop and conduct senior wellness programs. Wellness and prevention are clearly outlined as important parts of the physical therapist's scope of practice in APTA's *Guide to Physical Therapist Practice*. And the move to the Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) degree as the preferred degree for the profession allows for greater education and training within this critical, yet new, area of practice.

Naturally, those who specialize in the area of geriatric physical therapy may be in the best position to move into this area of practice. They have ready access to the client population and specialized knowledge and experience about the unique needs of the older exerciser.

But physical therapists in other practice settings can also be in advantageous positions to get started. For instance, physical therapists in an orthopedics or sports physical therapy private practice can easily add senior wellness programs to their offerings. And those who specialize in the area of women's health may want to consider offering specific fitness programs, such as exercise classes, for those who have or are at risk for osteoporosis. Or physical therapists who have aquatics practices may want to offer pool

exercise programs for seniors.

For those who have not had experience in geriatric physical therapy, there is a wealth of opportunities for continuing education and self-study. APTA ([www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org)) and the Section on Geriatrics ([www.geriaticsppt.org](http://www.geriaticsppt.org)) have numerous offerings. APTA's Annual Conferences and Combined Sections Meetings always have programming specific to the practice of geriatrics. Search the Section publications *Geri Notes* and *Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy* and APTA's *Physical Therapy*, as well as countless other scientific and health care publications, such as *American Geriatric Journal*, for articles on exercise and aging. For a listing of *PT Magazine* articles about physical therapists who have developed successful senior wellness programs, see "Suggested Readings" at the end of the fact sheet.

APTA is one of many national organizations that were instrumental in developing and supporting the *National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults Aged 50 and Older*. The *National Blueprint* initiative has developed a wealth of resources, including consumer information, publications, and listings of conferences. Information on the Blueprint, member organizations, and links to resources can be accessed at [www.agingblueprint.org](http://www.agingblueprint.org).

Networking with physical therapists who have experience in the area of senior wellness is a valuable way to gain insight and experience. See the Membership Directory on APTA's Web site ([www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org)). This searchable database for members only provides access to members by interest area and geographic location. In addition, the Section on Geriatrics has a Health Promotion and Wellness Special Interest Group.

### Reimbursement

Although there have been some promising developments in

## Getting Started

Physical therapists who have made their way in the area of senior wellness report that the options for launching a program are many and varied. Here are their ideas:

- "Get out into the community. Provide programs through local YMCAs, area agencies on aging, senior centers, social clubs, adult education centers, and health fairs. Offerings can be as simple as a free community education seminar or as specific as an exercise program for people with arthritis or a balance and fall prevention class. When considering community programs, it is often important to work as a team with other health care professionals. The wellness arena includes many other professionals, such as those involved with spiritual aspects of health as well as other fitness professionals. It goes a long way when you take the time to understand and respect what other players bring to the table."
- "Add a senior wellness program to your private practice. Clients can move on to a PT-supervised fitness program once they have completed traditional physical therapy. And you can direct market to the public, bringing seniors in specifically for individually tailored and supervised exercise programs, which may also include group classes."
- "Offer services through retirement communities and assisted living facilities. You may want to contract directly with the management or offer programs directly to residents. These communities often have readily available facilities such as gyms and pools."
- "Market directly to your referral sources. Let the physicians in your community know what you can do for their older patients. The idea of physical therapists providing wellness services to the older population may be a new concept to them. But once they realize what we have to offer, it is not too difficult to win them over. When considering referral sources, don't overlook your physical therapy colleagues. They may be thrilled to learn that they can refer clients who have completed rehabilitation to another physical therapist who can supervise a safe and effective fitness program for them."
- "Talk to companies that have corporate fitness programs. They may want to consider adding their retiree population."
- "Approach health clubs. Many health club managers are well aware that there is an untapped market of older citizens who would benefit from fitness programs. They may be only too happy to take guidance from the health care professionals with the knowledge and expertise to help them offer such programs in a safe, effective, and responsible manner."

recent years when it comes to third-party payments for wellness and prevention programs, the reality is that most insurers still do not reimburse health care professionals for these services. The good news is that the American public understands the value of prevention and wellness services and is willing to pay directly for the expertise of wellness professionals. While client

fees for evaluation, assessment, and development of an individualized exercise program might be prohibitive for a small segment of the elder population on fixed incomes, there are many affordable options for wellness services when provided through group education and exercise programs.

Some physical therapists choose to make community senior well-

ness programs accessible to all by providing their expertise on a *pro bono* basis. In addition to the rewards of community service, these programs offer PTs valuable public relations opportunities that provide them with recognition in their communities as senior wellness experts.

### Risk Management

It is important to understand that not all of the risk exposure involved in the provision of wellness services may be covered by a physical therapy professional liability policy. The potential for liability exists and must be addressed whether you are providing services for free or being paid by the patient/client or a third party. Most of the risk potential will be related to the services you will be providing; however, there may be other types of risks that you will need to consider, such as those arising from property-related incidents.

For this reason, before entering the wellness arena or any new practice arena, physical therapists should research and understand what risks are involved and take steps to be sure that they are adequately protected, which may involve adding insurance protection to one's portfolio. You should also be certain that you are acting in compliance with the practice act in the state(s) in

which you are licensed, and that you consider carefully whether your experience and expertise are compatible with the type of services you will provide.

There are many resources that can help you assess and address your risks, including: APTA's Risk Management and Member Benefit Services Department, state practice acts through APTA's Web site ([www.apta.org/Govt\\_Affairs/state/state\\_practice](http://www.apta.org/Govt_Affairs/state/state_practice)), your state's licensure board ([www.fsbpt.org/directory.cfm](http://www.fsbpt.org/directory.cfm)), and various types of professionals, such as risk managers and independent insurance agents.

### Rewards

"Helping people adapt healthy lifestyles is rewarding and challenging. All PTs have seen the ill effects of growing old without taking care of yourself. Now we have the opportunity to prevent debilitating conditions for an ever-growing aging population," says one PT speaking on behalf of her profession. "Not only are we helping people stay healthy and independent and enjoy their later years, but we are contributing on a global level as well. We have a health care crisis on our hands. And if we don't take care of ourselves as we get older, we will bankrupt society."

### Suggested Readings

The following *PT Magazine* articles tell the stories of PTs who have launched successful senior wellness programs:

Barber BH. Niche practices in geriatrics. *PT-Magazine of Physical Therapy*. 2000;4:37-42.

Davolt S, Woods EN. Profiles in wellness. *PT-Magazine of Physical Therapy*. 1998;12:33-44.

Davolt S. New niches in physical fitness. *PT-Magazine of Physical Therapy*. 1997;3:32-41.

Gallichio J, Berthold S, Kubik K. Bridging the gap: fitness through the ages. *PT-Magazine of Physical Therapy*. 2000;1:54-58.

Woods EN. Innovative programs in geriatrics. *PT-Magazine of Physical Therapy*. 1995;5:58-63.

### References

1 Fiaterone MA, Marks ED, Ryan ND, et al. High intensity strength training in nonagenarians: effects on skeletal muscle. *JAMA*. 1990;263:3029-3034.

2 Wolf SL, Kutner NG, Green RC, McNeely E. The Atlanta FIC-SIT study: two exercise interventions to reduce frailty in elders. *J Am Geriatric Soc*. 1993;41:329-332.

### Resources

American Physical Therapy Association  
[www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org)

APTA's Section on Geriatrics  
[www.geriaticsppt.org](http://www.geriaticsppt.org)

American College of Sports Medicine Interest Group on Aging  
[www.acsm.org](http://www.acsm.org)

American Senior Fitness Association  
[www.seniorfitness.net](http://www.seniorfitness.net)

International Council on Active Aging  
[www.icaa.org](http://www.icaa.org)

International Society for Aging and Physical Activity  
[www.isapa.org](http://www.isapa.org)

National Institute on Aging  
[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)

### Acknowledgments

APTA thanks the following members for providing input for this fact sheet: Dale Avers, PT, MSEd; Janet Bezner, PT, PhD; Constance McCloy, PT, PhD; and Sara Meeks, PT, MS, GCS.



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