

NDPTA Quality Assurance Bulletin

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Updating the NDPTA membership on the current best evidence and standards of practice

Resolve to Grow: Physical Therapy Specialist Certification

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What is Physical Therapist Specialist Certification?

The specialist certification program was established to provide formal recognition for physical therapists with advanced clinical knowledge, experience, and skills in a special area of practice and to assist consumers and the health care community in identifying these physical therapists. Clinical specialization in physical therapy responds to a specific area of patient need and requires knowledge, skill, and experience exceeding that of the entry level physical therapist and unique to the specialized area of practice.

The clinical Specialization Program is a voluntary process, and is started by the physical therapist. Clinical Specialization is not meant to limit an area of practice to only certified physical therapists. Certified physical therapists can work in any area of physical therapy, and are not required to restrict their practice to their area of certification.

What is the history of Clinical Specialization?

The APTA's House of Delegates established the Task Force on Clinical Specialization in 1976. The Task Force developed the *Essentials for Certification of Advanced Clinical Competence in Physical Therapy*, which was adopted in 1978. The Commission for Certification of Advanced Clinical Competence was appointed in 1979. This commission is the precursor to the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties (ABPTS, www.abpts.org).

As specialty areas were recognized by the House of Delegates, the ABPTS appointed a specialty council to identify and define advanced skills, establish eligibility criteria, and develop the exam.

Why should I become a Clinical Specialist?

The specialist certification program was established to provide formal recognition for physical therapists with advanced clinical knowledge, experience, and skills in a special area of practice and to assist consumers and the health care community in identifying these physical therapists. Clinical specialization in physical therapy responds to a specific area of patient need and requires knowledge, skill, and experience exceeding that of the physical therapist at entry to the profession and unique to the specialized area of practice.

The Clinical Specialization Program is a voluntary process, and is started by the physical therapist. Clinical Specialization is not meant to limit an area of practice to only certified physical therapists. Certified physical therapists can work in any area of physical therapy, and are not required to restrict their practice to their area of certification.

Who can become a Clinical Specialist?

The ABPTS has established minimum eligibility requirements for the specialist certification examinations. These are a current permanent/unrestricted licensure to practice Physical Therapy in the United States, Puerto Rico or the Virgin Islands and evidence of at least 2,000 hours of clinical practice in the specialty area. Twenty-five percent of these hours must have occurred within the last three years.

Each clinical specialty has its own specific additional requirements. These have been developed by specialty councils with the approval of ABPTS.

After completing the hours of clinical practice experience directly related to working with patients in the chosen area, a clinician may choose to complete the specialist certification examination in that area.

What areas of physical therapy have Clinical Specialties?

The Specialty Council on Cardiopulmonary Physical Therapy was the first council to complete the process of identifying and defining advanced skills, establishing eligibility criteria, and developing an examination. The Cardiopulmonary specialist certification examination was first given in 1985.

Since then, eight additional areas of physical therapy specialization have been developed:

- Clinical Electrophysiology
- Geriatrics
- Neurology
- Oncology
- Orthopaedics
- Pediatrics
- Sports
- Women's Health

How many Physical Therapists are Clinical Specialists? (As of July 2017)

Clinical Specialty	In North Dakota	In Minnesota	In the United States
Cardiovascular and Pulmonary	0	2	226
Clinical Electrophysiology	0	1	127
Geriatric	4	46	1964
Neurologic	6	52	2036
Orthopaedic	28	265	11099
Pediatric	4	17	1399
Sports	9	59	1807
Women's Health	2	5	381
Total	50	437	18374

The ABPTS website (www.abpts.org) has a national database of board-certified clinical specialists in physical therapy.

How can I become a Clinical Specialist?

After gaining at least 2,000 hours of clinical practice experience directly related to working with patients in the chosen area, a clinician may choose to complete the specialist certification examination in that area.

How do I know if I am ready?

There are several ways to assess your readiness to take the examination. There are Descriptions of Specialty Practice (DSP) for each area. The content in each DSP outlines the knowledge, skills and abilities related to clinical practice in that specialty area. For more information, check the ABPTS website at www.abpts.org.

How do I take the test?

The next opportunity for the examinations will be March 3 - March 17, 2018. Test takers in 2019 must register for the test before July 31, 2018. The examination is written, with approximately 200 questions. The questions are objective multiple-choice questions that either can be stand-alone questions or may be part of a series of questions that relate to a case. The examination measures the application of advanced knowledge and skills required of physical therapy clinical specialists as described in the Description of Specialty Practice for each area.

How much does it cost to take the examination?

There is a nonrefundable application review fee, which is submitted at the time of application. The examination fee is submitted after the applicant is approved to sit for the examination. For applicants who do not pass the examination the first time, they can retake the test the following year.

	Application Review Fee	Exam Fee
APTA Member	\$515	\$800
Non-APTA Member	\$860	\$1525

What is the Orthopaedic Clinical Specialty?

The Orthopaedic Specialist Certification is the most common certification. More than half of all clinical specialists are certified in Orthopaedics. In the United States there are 12,893 Orthopaedic Clinical Specialists as of July 28, 2017, with 28 in North Dakota and 265 in Minnesota.

The first step to become an Orthopaedic Clinical Specialist is submitting the application. The application and application review fee are both due on July 31 for Orthopaedic applicants. The examination fee is due November 30. If you are interested in taking the examination in 2019, check the ABPTS website for specific deadlines.

Orthopaedic applicants must meet one of the following requirements for Direct Patient Care.

Option A: Submit evidence of 2,000 hours of direct patient care as a licensed U.S. physical therapist (temporary license excluded) in orthopaedics in the past 10 years. At least 500 of these hours must be completed in the last 3 years. The direct patient care hours only include time practicing in Orthopaedics in the United States or its possessions or territories.

Option B: Submit evidence of successful completion of an APTA-accredited post professional clinical residency in Orthopaedics in the last 10 years. Applicants currently enrolled in an ABPTRFE-accredited clinical residency, or enrolled in a residency program that has been granted candidacy status, may apply for the specialist certification examination prior to completion of the clinical residency. These applicants will be conditionally approved to sit for the examination as long as they meet all other eligibility requirements pending submission of evidence of successful completion of the clinical residency to the APTA's Specialist Certification Program no later than one month before the examination window opens.