

What Is a Rehabilitation Physician/Physiatrist?

A rehabilitation physician (also called physiatrist [fizz ee at' trist]) or is a medical doctor who has completed training in the medical specialty of physical medicine and rehabilitation.

To become a rehabilitation physician, individuals must successfully complete four years of graduate medical education/school and five additional years of postdoctoral residency training.

Many rehabilitation physicians choose to complete additional one-or-two-year fellowship training in specific areas of the specialty such as Pain Medicine, Occupational Rehabilitation, Sports Medicine, Musculoskeletal Rehabilitation, Spinal Cord Injury, Stroke etc.

There are 79 accredited residency programs in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation in the United States and 9 residency programs in Canada.

Specifically, rehabilitation physician:

- Diagnose and treat pain
- Restore maximum function lost through injury, illness or disabling conditions
- Treat the whole person, not just the problem area
- Lead a team of medical professionals
- Provide non-surgical treatments
- Explain your medical problems and treatment/prevention plan

What is Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation?

Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (PM&R) is one of the 24 medical specialties. It is the branch of medicine emphasizing the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disorders – particularly those of the musculoskeletal and neurological systems.

Within medicine, most areas are divided into medical and surgical specialties. Examples are Cardiology (medicine) and Cardio-surgery (surgery), Neurology (medicine) and Neurosurgery (surgery). PM&R (medicine) has a similar relationship to Orthopedics (surgery).

The specialty focuses on evaluation of impairments, disability and work capacity of patients with musculoskeletal and neurological disorders.

Main goal of the specialty is the restoration of function.

Growth of Specialty

Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (PM&R) began in earnest in USA in the 1930s with the physical treatment of musculoskeletal and neurological conditions, and broadened its scope during World War II when thousands of veterans came home with catastrophic disabilities.

Royal College of Physicians and Surgeon of Canada recognized PM&R as a specialty in 1944.

As our population ages and musculoskeletal injuries, back pain and quality of life becomes more of a concern, the field of rehabilitation medicine will continue to grow and will continue to move to the forefront of medicine.

To keep pace with increased public demand for services, the number of PM&R residents has grown dramatically. Because of the phenomenal growth of the specialty, more than 70% of physiatrists are 45 years old or younger.

Economic changes require rehabilitation medicine input to ensure that outpatient rehabilitation services are provided in a cost-effective manner.

In recent years, PM&R has seen an increased focus on musculoskeletal medicine, industrial medicine, pain management, sports medicine, and electromyography/nerve conduction studies (EMG/NCS).

Scope of Practice

PM&R is often called the “quality of life profession” because its aim is to restore optimal patient functioning. The job of a rehabilitation physician is to treat any disability resulting from disease or injury involving any organ system. The focus is not on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally, and vocationally – after injury or disease.

The problems that rehabilitation physicians manage span the entire spectrum, from the most complicated multiple trauma to injury prevention for athletes.

Rehabilitation physicians treat acute and chronic pain and musculoskeletal disorders. They may see a person who lifts a heavy object at work and experiences back pain, a basketball player who sprains an ankle and needs rehabilitation to play again, or a knitter who has carpal tunnel syndrome or tendonitis.

Rehabilitation physicians coordinate the long-term rehabilitation process for patients with chronic pain, spinal cord injuries, cancer, stroke, brain injuries, amputations, multiple sclerosis or other neurological disorders.

Rehabilitation physicians are trained to perform the most complete musculoskeletal and neurological examination possible and then to restore function. Therefore, they are seen as the “ideal doctors” to sub-specialize in the field of Pain Medicine (other medical specialist that sub-specialize in Pain Medicine are anesthesiologists and neurologists).

Where do Rehabilitation Physicians practice?

Rehabilitation physicians practice in rehabilitation centers, hospitals, and in private offices. They often have broad practices, but some concentrate on one area such as pain medicine, industrial rehabilitation, sports medicine, musculoskeletal rehabilitation or many other special interests.

How do Rehabilitation Physicians diagnose?

Rehabilitation physicians’ best diagnostic tool is their training to perform a complete medical history and physical examination of the nerves, muscles and joint system.

They are trained to perform electrodiagnostic studies like electromyography (EMG), nerve conduction studies (NCS), and somatosensory evoked potentials. They use X-rays, CT scanning, MRI’s and other imaging methods.

These techniques help the rehabilitation physicians to diagnose conditions that cause pain, weakness, and numbness.

What kind of treatments do Rehabilitation Physicians offer?

When treating patients with physical problems, the Rehabilitation physician often serves as the leader of an interdisciplinary team. The team may include medical professionals such as neurologists, psychiatrists, orthopedic surgeons, and urologists, and non-physician health

professionals such as physical therapists, occupational therapists, chiropractors, speech pathologists, vocational counselors, psychologists and social workers.

Rehabilitation physicians offer a broad spectrum of medical services. They may prescribe drugs or assistive devices, such as a brace or artificial limb or they may prescribe therapeutic exercises. They also use therapies, with the help of therapists, such as heat and cold, electrotherapies, massage, biofeedback, traction, and therapeutic exercise. They do not perform surgery but are very skilled at joint, ligaments and muscle injections to relieve the pain.

Why Choose a Rehabilitation Physician?

Because Rehabilitation physicians offer an aggressive, non-surgical approach to pain and injury, these physicians are the ideal choice for the treatment of a wide variety of conditions. Following is a listing of some of the conditions that Rehabilitation physicians have extensive training in diagnosing and treating:

- Chronic pain
- Myofascial pain
- Low back pain
- Neck pain
- Fibromyalgia
- Arthritis
- Amputations
- Spinal cord injuries
- Brain injuries
- Stroke
- Work injuries
- Motor vehicle accident injuries

Most importantly, Rehabilitation physicians treat the whole patient, not just the patient's symptoms. Rehabilitation physicians share their medical knowledge to help patients understand their condition and provide the tools and resources to manage it.

Through integrated focused care and comprehensive diagnosis and treatment, Rehabilitation physicians add quality to the lives of millions of patients each year. The goal: getting the patient back into the game – not just back on the sidelines.

Further Information about the Specialty

Visit the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation website:

<http://www.aapmr.org/patients/aboutpmr/Pages/physiatrist.aspx>