

How Physical Therapy Can Help in Your Recovery After Amputation

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*Translated into plain language by Helen Osborne of [Health Literacy Consulting](#)
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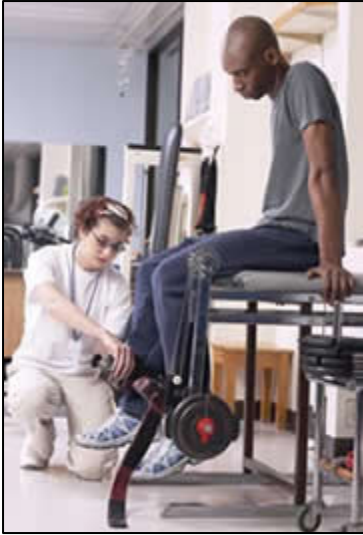
Physical therapy helps people recover after amputation. It not only helps people physically (improving how their bodies work) but also emotionally (coping with depression and other feelings). Here are answers to questions that many people ask about physical therapy.



When is the right time for physical therapy?

Physical therapy can help throughout a person's recovery. This includes:

- **After surgery and before getting a prosthesis.** Physical therapy at this time helps ensure a person's long-term well-being.
- **When people cannot use prostheses for a while.** Sometimes, people cannot use their prostheses because of health problems or poor fit. Or they may have residual-limb issues such as skin breakdown, neuropathy, or the need for more surgery. Physical therapy can help prepare people to use their prostheses again when these problems are resolved.



- **When people decide not to use prostheses.** Physical therapy can help even if people decide not to use prostheses at all. Physical therapy can maintain and improve a person's circulation, skin, strength and endurance. It can also reduce a person's risk of getting contractures. (See below to learn more about

contractures.)

How do I find the right therapist?

Some, but not all, physical therapists are trained to help people recover after amputations. It is important to find the right therapist to work with. You might start by talking with your doctor, calling the local hospital, or asking at your nearby therapy clinic.

What is the right amount of physical therapy?

Recovery time varies from person to person. You need to have enough for the physical therapist to monitor (check) your residual limb and incision (wound area).

Sometimes, residual limbs take longer than normal to heal because of infection or skin-pressure problems. Physical therapists can help during this time.

What is the right kind of physical therapy?

Physical therapy helps amputees in many ways. This includes caring for residual limbs, preventing or reducing contractures, improving motion, and getting ready for prostheses. Here are some facts to know:

Caring for the residual limb

- **Shaping.** A person's residual limb needs shaping after surgery. This is often done with an elastic bandage or shrinker. Sometimes these are too loose or too tight and cause circulation problems, pressure sores, or misshaped limbs. Physical therapists can monitor and fix any problems that may occur.
- **Massage.** This helps "toughen up" residual limbs and make them less sensitive. Massage also helps prepare limbs for prostheses. Physical therapists know when to use certain types of massage. They also can teach people how to massage their own limbs.

Preventing or reducing contractures

Contractures are caused by shortened muscles, tendons or skin that prevents normal movement of tissues and joints. When this happens, people cannot straighten their knees or elbows all the way. One reason for contractures is static positioning – when people do not move their residual limbs enough.

Physical therapists can help reduce the risk of contractures by stretching, good positioning, and range-of-motion exercises. As a physical therapist, I know it is better to prevent contractures rather than fix them after they occur.

Improving motion

Amputees need good limb motion so that prostheses fit well and work the way they should. Physical therapists can help by improving a person's range of motion.

Getting ready for prostheses

People need strong residual limbs to get the most from their prostheses. Physical therapists can help by “waking up” residual limbs soon after surgery. This includes strengthening, neuromuscular reeducation, and stabilization. The goal is to help

people increase their strength, gain control of their residual limbs, and get ready for their prostheses.

About the Author



Scott Waite, MPT, is the director of Physical Therapy Services for Fourroux Orthotics & Prosthetics. Waite specializes in prosthetic gait training and idiopathic scoliosis bracing. He also consults patients with recent amputations. Waite received his Bachelor's Degree in Biology and his Master's Degree in Physical Therapy. He has been treating people with amputations for five years.

Translated from Getting Appropriate Physical Therapy: How Can It Help Your Recovery?

http://www.amputee-coalition.org/inmotion/sep_oct_06/physical_therapy.html