

Helping People Live Better with the Diagnosis of a Brain Tumor: Physical Therapy

Introduction

Sometimes a brain tumor, or the treatment needed for it, can affect balance or sensation, muscle movement, strength, or coordination. Surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy may make you feel fatigued and reduce your endurance. These effects may cause challenges in the way you move your body to complete basic tasks such as walking, standing and sitting.

Physical therapy is a branch of rehabilitative medicine offering examination and treatment of musculoskeletal and neuromuscular problems that affect ones abilities to move and function. Through this type of therapy, you can learn how to improve your physical skills, mobilize in a different way, or use assistive equipment. Physical therapy can also teach you how to exercise safely to improve your function and health. Exercising is beneficial for reducing stress, relieving pain, and preventing disability.

Physical therapists understand the importance of regaining control over your body following the experience of a brain tumor. They can help you reduce your limitations and perform the functional activities that you value the most. From teaching you how to keep your balance while walking or sitting to helping you regain muscle strength, physical therapists are prepared to help you recondition your body for optimal safe and independent function.

<p>This article focuses on physical therapy. Please also see the second part of this series, focused on occupational therapy.</p>

What can physical therapy offer people with brain tumors?

A physical therapist can help you identify mobility skills that have been affected by your brain tumor or treatment and determine what assistance you may need. Depending on your condition, you may be able to improve your physical functioning by performing exercises and activities. If

some of your challenges are permanent or severe, you may be able to learn compensation techniques and how to use assistive devices. This may include re-learning how to walk or learning to walk in a different way, such as with the assistance of a cane or leg bracing. If you need help from others to move your body for specific activities, your physical therapist will teach you how to instruct others to help move you safely and provide the appropriate amount of assistance that you need. If you are dependent on others for mobility, a physical therapist can help you select and learn to use the wheelchair most appropriate for you.

Physical therapists can use therapeutic modalities to minimize pain and movement dysfunction. For example, heat packs or ultrasound combined with stretching or therapeutic massage can relieve tight painful muscles and promote movement. Specific muscles can be targeted with vibration, cold temperature, or transcutaneous electric nerve stimulation (TENS) to stimulate muscle contractions and facilitate movement. If you are unable to move a part of your body, such as an arm or leg, your physical therapist can teach you how to safely exercise your affected limb to improve circulation, reduce swelling, and keep the muscles healthy to prevent deformities and health complications.

It is common to experience a decrease in endurance following surgery or treatment for a brain tumor. Inactivity, sustained bed rest, and some forms of radiation or chemotherapy may make you feel tired and weak. A physical therapist can evaluate your strength and stamina and recommend the right amount of exercise to help you safely build up to your maximum level of physical activity. Regular exercise can help you improve and maintain your posture, balance, and mobility. Regular exercise is also important for your overall health and stress reduction.

What is the evaluation process like?

A physical therapist's initial evaluation will evaluate your baseline skill level, strengths, limitations, and degree of functional independence. The evaluation results are necessary to develop a customized treatment plan with specific short term and long term goals. You should tell the evaluator about any difficulties that you are experiencing or safety concerns that you have. You should also tell your evaluator your goals, expectations, and priorities. This information is helpful for formulating your individualized plan for success.

There are different types of evaluations. Standardized tests may be used to evaluate muscle coordination, strength, and endurance. For subjective tests, the physical therapist will ask you to perform certain activities, such as maintaining your balance while sitting or raising your arms up as high as you can to test your range of motion.

Your degree of independent functional movement will be assessed. You will be asked to perform common daily tasks, often called “Activities of Daily Living” or “ADLs,” including getting on and off a chair and getting in and out of bed. Your therapists will determine your degree of independence with the physical functions that are essential for independent daily living. Their purpose is to make recommendations to improve your mobility, safety, and independence.

Who can provide physical therapy?

Physical therapists are professionals that enter the field after earning a masters or doctorate degree in physical therapy. They must successfully complete clinical internships and pass a national licensure examination.

How can I get physical therapy?

Ask your doctor to write a referral or prescription for a physical therapy evaluation and treatment. The hospital at which you are being treated for your brain tumor may have a rehabilitative medicine program that includes physical therapy services. Or, you might look for a brain injury rehabilitation program; these programs view brain surgery as a brain injury. The NeuroTrauma Registry (www.neure.com) offers a comprehensive online listing of brain injury rehabilitation service providers. The American Physical Therapy Association (www.apta.org) has a physical therapist search feature that allows you to search by state and therapist expertise. Look for a physical therapist with expertise in “neurological” conditions.

What part of my insurance policy should I check to see if services are covered?

Read your health insurance policy to see what type of rehabilitation therapies are covered.

Then, call your insurance provider for clarification of your benefits. If you need to stay within a “network” of providers, your insurance provider can help you find a list of these specially contracted providers. You can also ask the rehab program professionals for assistance. If the program you choose is not in your insurance network, the program may be willing to contract with your insurance company at a negotiated “test case” rate. If the program cannot work with your insurer, ask for the names of other brain injury programs in your area.

What resources are there if my insurance does not cover such services?

Ask your insurer if they will cover an evaluation for a home-based physical therapy program. This may include evaluation and training in a focused, specific area. For example, if you are interested in improving your muscle strength or correcting balance problems, a physical therapist can perform an evaluation and suggest therapy techniques for you to practice at home. This type of evaluation will limit your personal expenditure on weekly therapy visits while providing you with professional suggestions and guidelines.

The second part of this series focuses on the benefits offered to brain tumor patients through occupational therapy. Visit our web site at www.abta.org, or call us at 800-886-2282 for a copy of that article.

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