

# Physical Therapists Positioned to Serve as Primary Care Providers Throughout the U.S. Military



## Defense Department to Roll Out System-Wide Direct Access to Physical Therapists

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**Alexandria, Va.** — The American Physical Therapy Association announces that the U.S. Department of Defense will allow physical therapists to serve as primary care providers for neuromusculoskeletal conditions across all military settings. This designation is based on significant DOD analysis and further confirms the value and cost-effectiveness of early intervention physical therapy.

"The Department of Defense's decision to elevate physical therapists as primary care providers for neuromusculoskeletal conditions is a testament to the effectiveness and efficiency of the physical therapist's role in our military health system," said Congressman Trent Kelly, R-Miss, who was responsible for ensuring that a request for further analysis of taking physical therapy primary care system-wide be included in the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act. "This move is not just a win for the quality of health care for our service members, but also for the judicious use of our military's health care resources."

APTA, in collaboration with APTA Federal, pressed for the study to expand on existing research conducted at the Joint Base Lewis-McChord physical therapy service line that found seeing a physical therapist first for musculoskeletal care was associated with an estimated \$3.6 million in reduced costs.

"It is entirely feasible for physical therapists to serve in a primary care [neuromusculoskeletal expert] role throughout the DOD," the report states. "Physical therapists employed in the DOD already have the credentialing and privileging to perform this role. There is research to suggest that direct access to [physical therapy] is safe, effective, and will improve patient outcomes, military readiness, preservation of the force, and reduce costs."

"The value in seeing a physical therapist first, both in terms of cost and outcomes, has been well established within the military health system, and the DOD decision is a clear

acknowledgment of that reality," said Brian Allen, APTA congressional affairs specialist. "APTA applauds this expansion and looks forward to tracking outcomes that we are confident will help make the case for an elevated primary care role for physical therapists in the broader health care system."

The [report](#) recounts a DOD initiative to leverage its direct access program as the avenue for taking physical therapy primary care system-wide. The project gathered information on the existing physical therapist direct access programs, best practices that facilitated direct access in military treatment facilities, and barriers to implementing direct access, then used that information to implement a phased-in program that will extend to all DOD-related settings by the end of 2025. In the meantime, DOD is tracking data on utilization, patient volume, and other elements.

The DOD findings are also consistent with the results of a landmark study conducted by APTA, "[The Economic Value of Physical Therapy in the United States](#)," that analyzed the cost-effectiveness of seeing a physical therapist first for eight common conditions, including low back pain, tennis elbow, and carpal tunnel syndrome.

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The American Physical Therapy Association represents more than 100,000 physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and physical therapy students nationwide. Visit [apta.org](http://apta.org) to learn more.