



The APA Valuing Skills Series

Physiotherapy in disability



The NDIS is one of the fastest growing expenses of the federal Budget¹ and yet many people with disability miss out on the care they need. This means there is a missed opportunity for greater social and economic participation.

One in six Australians, or about 4.4 million people, are estimated to live with a disability and about half of them need help with their mobility.² There are almost 600,000 participants in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) but only around 86,000 receive physiotherapy supports³.


Physiotherapists provide expertise in improving function and participation and building the capacity of people with disabilities; however, NDIS participants don't always receive the physiotherapy support they need. Those with disabilities who fall outside the Scheme have limited access to publicly funded physiotherapy services.

Why we need reform.

We can achieve better outcomes for people with disability by improving early and ongoing access to physiotherapy supports and treatments.

The APA calls for greater access to physiotherapy for people with disability in primary healthcare and across the care and education sectors. By improving the participation of people with disability, we create value for society as a whole. It's an investment in the future.

Who is falling through the cracks?^{iv}



Adults with disability are **six times** more likely than those without disability to assess their health as 'poor' or 'fair'.

People with disability are less physically active

72% Nearly three-quarters of those aged 15 and over with disability do not do enough physical activity.

52% This compares with about half of those without disability who do not do enough physical activity.

Physical activity levels are significantly lower in people with intellectual disability, which has implications for physical and emotional health.

They have a disproportionate risk for obesity

72% of adults with disability are overweight or obese compared with **55%** of those without disability.

And are less likely to be in the workforce

Labour force participation of people with a disability aged 15–64 years is **53.4%** compared to **84.1%** of people the same age without a disability.

Physiotherapy's role in improving participation.

The solution? Bridging the gaps to allow access to physiotherapy for all people with disability across all settings.

As a first step, the APA asks the federal government to fund early and ongoing access to physiotherapy (including cost-effective group sessions) for people with disability in primary care beyond the very limited MBS items that exist for chronic conditions. Timely physiotherapy improves functional outcomes for participants, which in turn reduces costs to government by facilitating return to work and participation in society.^v

It is critical that governments ensure coordination and consistency of access, accessibility and availability of physiotherapy treatments and supports across states and within states, in the healthcare, aged care and education sectors and where required in recreational and sport community settings. For example, embedding physiotherapists in schools to provide therapy supports based on physical goals would improve inclusion, participation and interaction with peers. Likewise, greater access to physiotherapy for people over 65 and in aged care settings can help with the prevention of falls (a factor in acquiring a disability) and increase opportunities for independent living.

Benefits of physiotherapy.

Ensuring that people with disabilities achieve the highest level of function, independence and mobility possible must be a national priority.

For Australians with disability, access to physiotherapy services means access to clinicians who are highly skilled in the diagnosis, assessment and treatment of motor impairments and movement disorders, including the sensory, musculoskeletal and neurological contributors.

Physiotherapists can improve movement and function, treat and reduce pain, and increase participation in social and economic life, including by assisting with return-to-work capability. Physiotherapists are trained in the biomechanics of movement, combining knowledge of physics, physiology and anatomy to analyse movement and diagnose movement difficulties. As members of an Ahpra-regulated profession, physiotherapists use clinical reasoning to plan, develop, initiate and continue treatment programs for people with disabilities.

Why physiotherapy is important for people with a disability.

Physiotherapists provide essential healthcare for many people with disability.

Physiotherapists have expert knowledge in how people move and learn to move and in the development of movement, specifically as these relate to the health, wellbeing and quality of life of people of all ages. People with disability benefit from physiotherapy services throughout the different phases of their lives and as their condition changes. Physiotherapy helps to meet their current needs and, where possible, to prevent future needs.

The physiotherapist role in disability care

1 | Identify physical impairments and investigate the interrelationship between movement and other neurological and physiological factors such as sensory perception and pain.

2 | Conduct rigorous assessments and continually monitor function and mobility for people with disabilities.

3 | Determine the treatment plan, the range of assistance needed and the education needs of the patient and their key team members.

4 | Provide manual therapy techniques to relieve pain symptoms and facilitate normal movement and function.

5 | Provide and teach specific exercise programs tailored to the individual.

6 | Reassess and progress rehabilitation plans.

7 | Trial, prescribe, tailor and fit out a range of assistive technology.

Skills in focus.

Physiotherapists maintain, develop and improve abilities and skills through specifically tailored exercise, functional training, therapies and support equipment that help develop new motor skills and advance existing abilities. Supporting movement and mobility, strengthening muscles and managing pain are specific physiotherapy treatments that enhance the ability to participate in activities and function more fully.

Physiotherapists also play a vital role in early childhood intervention.



Physiotherapists working with **children and families** in the community use a range of practices based on the Early Childhood Intervention Association's best practice guidelines.

Respiratory physiotherapy provides important support in disability care.



Patients with **neurodegenerative diagnoses** are at an increased risk of developing respiratory complications. Respiratory physiotherapy helps to support and improve participants' functional lung capacity and fitness.

Early physiotherapy interventions for cerebral palsy maximise neuroplasticity.



Physiotherapy interventions target specific motor symptoms of **cerebral palsy** and reduce long-term complications. Physiotherapists provide therapeutic interventions to help manage **cerebral palsy** and enhance functional outcomes.

References:

1. Commonwealth of Australia (2023). *Intergenerational report*. Available at <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/p2023-435150.pdf>
2. AIHW (2022). *People with disability in Australia*. Available at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/summary>
3. NDIA (2023). *NDIS 2022–23 Annual Pricing Review Report*. Available at <https://www.ndis.gov.au/providers/pricing-arrangements/making-pricing-decisions/annual-pricing-review>
4. AIHW, op.cit.
5. Nous (2020). *Value of Physiotherapy in Australia*. Available at: <https://australian.physio/advocacy/economic-value>