

UNDERSTANDING PHYSICAL THERAPY DEGREES, DESIGNATORS, AND OTHER CREDENTIALS

A degree or credential after a health care provider's name provides identification of earned education, experiential, and — in some cases — competency criteria in a particular area.

Disclaimer: Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants often include degrees and credentials after their names, which are voluntary in nature and should never be used by others to restrict the scope of physical therapist practice or to limit reimbursement for physical therapy services.

The following table explains degrees, designators, and other credentials commonly used by physical therapists and physical therapist assistants to further identify their level of academic education and/or areas of advanced education, experience, and skill.

Please contact APTA's Professional Development Department at profdev@apta.org if you have additions or questions.

INITIALS	DESCRIPTION	REQUIREMENTS
REGULATORY DESIGNATORS		
PT	The initials PT represent all licensed physical therapists .	Physical therapists are licensed professionals who have completed an accredited physical therapist program (professional entry-level degrees have evolved from certificate to clinical doctoral degree) and have passed a licensure examination.
PTA	The initials PTA represent all physical therapist assistants who are permitted to provide physical therapy services under the direction and supervision of a physical therapist.	Physical therapist assistants are educated at the associate degree level. Depending on state law, they may be licensed, certified, registered, or unregulated. They must meet the state requirements to work as a PTA.
None	Physical therapy aides and technicians have no regulatory designator.	Physical therapy aides and technicians are on-the-job-trained workers in the physical therapy clinic who assist the PT/PTA with tasks related to physical therapy services. They are not eligible for license, certification, or registration.

INITIALS	DESCRIPTION	REQUIREMENTS
PROFESSIONAL DESIGNATORS		
FAPTA	The initials FAPTA represent Fellows of the American Physical Therapy Association. These are PTs who have been recognized by the Association for work that has resulted in lasting and significant advances in the science, education, and practice of the profession of physical therapy.	Fellows of the American Physical Therapy Association are physical therapists. Most have advanced degrees, but that is not a requirement for being nominated or selected as a Fellow.
APTA DESIGNATORS INDICATING ADVANCED CLINICAL PRACTICE IN A SPECIALTY AREA		
CCS ECS GCS NCS OCS PCS SCS WCS	<p>Specialist certification initials represent PTs who demonstrate competence in both specialized knowledge and advanced clinical proficiency. The specialty areas are listed below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCS (Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Certified Specialist) • ECS (Clinical Electrophysiologic Certified Specialist) • GCS (Geriatric Certified Specialist) • NCS (Neurologic Certified Specialist) • OCS (Orthopaedic Certified Specialist) • PCS (Pediatric Certified Specialist) • SCS (Sports Certified Specialist) • WCS (Women’s Health Certified Specialist) was approved for specialist certification status in 2006. The first examination was administered in 2009. 	<p>PTs must meet the following minimum eligibility requirements to sit for the specialist certification examinations: 1) current licensure to practice physical therapy in the United States, Puerto Rico, or the Virgin Islands; and 2) evidence of a minimum of 2,000 hours of direct patient care in the specialty area, 25% of which must have occurred within the last 3 years. Additional specific requirements are required by each specialty area.</p> <p>PTs must pass the specialist certification examination and be recognized by the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties to use the designator. The certification is effective for 10 years, after which re-certification is required.</p>

INITIALS	DESCRIPTION	REQUIREMENTS
ACADEMIC DESIGNATORS		
MPT MSPT	These initials represent PTs with an entry-level master's degree: master of physical therapy or master of science in physical therapy.	Indicates physical therapists who earned a master's degree upon completion of the physical therapist professional program.
DPT	These initials represent PTs with a clinical doctoral degree in physical therapy.	Indicates PTs who earned a clinical doctoral degree upon completion of the physical therapist professional program. Also indicates licensed PTs (already holding a certificate, bachelor, or master's entry-level physical therapist degree) who have completed a postprofessional transitional doctoral physical therapist degree program to advance their knowledge and skills to the clinical doctorate level.
MS MA MSc	These initials represent PTs who may have completed postprofessional (beyond entry-level) masters degrees in physical therapy, including master of science (MS), and master of art (MA).	Postprofessional master's degree programs advance the PTs knowledge beyond that of entry-level, generally in an area of clinical, research, or administrative concentration.
MHE MPH MBA MPA MHS MHSc	These initials represent PTs who complete master's degrees in related areas such as master in health education (MHE), master in public health (MPH), master of business administration (MBA), master in public administration (MPA) and masters in health science (MHS or MHSc).	The master's degree designator typically follows the regulatory designator (eg, PT, MS). These programs often require a scholarly work called a thesis.
ScD DSc DScPT DPTSc ScDPT DHSc DHS	These initials represent PTs other postprofessional clinical doctoral degrees, including the doctor of science (ScD or DSc), doctor of science in physical therapy (DScPT), doctor of physical therapy science (DPTSc), science doctor of physical therapy (ScDPT), and doctor of health science (DHSc or DHS).	Postprofessional clinical doctoral degrees may generally advance the practicing physical therapist's knowledge and skill in contemporary practice and/or may focus on a specialized area of clinical practice with a mentored clinical practice experience. Some of these programs are designed to prepare the graduate to for the board specialty certification examination, and some require a doctoral project or dissertation.

INITIALS	DESCRIPTION	REQUIREMENTS
ACADEMIC DESIGNATORS		
PhD	These initials represent typically PTs and PTAs who have earned the academic doctor of philosophy degree, to be able to conduct independent research and to prepare for a role as an academic faculty member.	Doctor of philosophy denotes an academic doctoral degree that includes a major scholarly work called a dissertation. Typical PhD programs require 60 or more credits beyond the postprofessional master's degree.
EdD JD PsyD	These initials represent PTs who earn doctoral degrees in areas not related to physical therapy, such as law (JD), education (EdD), and psychology (PsyD) depending on their interests and work responsibilities.	