



The APA Valuing Skills Series

Differences between a physiotherapist and an exercise physiologist



In Australia, physiotherapists and exercise physiologists are both healthcare professionals who play important but distinct roles in promoting physical wellbeing through their respective areas of focus and expertise.

Physiotherapists and exercise physiologists use physical activity to help people prevent, manage or recover from illness or injury and promote healthy lifestyles. However, there are differences in treatment modalities.

Physiotherapists **diagnose** and engage in **therapeutic management** of many conditions involving the musculoskeletal, neurological, cardiovascular and respiratory systems. Physiotherapists may also diagnose and treat lymphatic conditions, incontinence and pelvic floor conditions and a range of paediatric presentations.

Exercise physiologists **prescribe exercise** interventions for building strength and functional capacity for a range of conditions. These interventions are exercise-based and include health and physical activity education and lifestyle modification.

Registration and governance frameworks

Patient safety and quality healthcare are essential for all allied health professionals. Physiotherapists and exercise physiologists operate under separate registration and governance requirements, and therefore their respective services follow different scopes of practice.

Physiotherapists are regulated health professionals under the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS) and subject to registration requirements under the *Australian Health Practitioner National Law Act 2009* (National Law). Ahpra works in partnership with the Physiotherapy Board of Australia as a result of this required registration under the NRAS. State and Territory Governments established the NRAS to be based on consistent, high-quality, national professional standards to ensure community access to a safe health workforce. Physiotherapy became one of the first professions to be nationally regulated with a National Board in 2010.

Exercise physiologists are a self-regulated profession and therefore not regulated under the NRAS or the National Law. Exercise and Sports Science Australia is the accrediting authority for accredited exercise physiologists and a member of the National Alliance of Self-Regulating Health Professionals, which has its own standards for regulation.

Differences in scope: main differences in treatment services

The physiotherapist can be the first port of call for musculoskeletal conditions.



If a musculoskeletal condition has not yet been seen or diagnosed, the patient should see a GP or physiotherapist first.

As **first contact professionals**, physiotherapists provide a range of first-line treatment options using a broad scope of practice across the life span.

A physiotherapist uses education and advice, movement, exercise, physical rehabilitation and manual therapy.

An exercise physiologist supports patients with exercise when safe to do so.



Exercise physiologists do not diagnose. Patients should see a GP or physiotherapist first for diagnosis and to determine the optimal treatment pathway.

Exercise physiologists offer a range of services, which include behavioural coaching, health education, exercise counselling and physical rehabilitation.

The main approach used by exercise physiologists is exercise alongside education strategies.

SKILL DIFFERENTIALS

Both physiotherapists and exercise physiologists can help to improve the lives of those living with acute and chronic health conditions, but each profession has a different set of responsibilities based on their respective treatment services.

What physiotherapists do

Physiotherapists assess, diagnose, treat and manage acute and chronic conditions, disability, injury and pain.

Physiotherapists **diagnose, manage and treat** a diverse range of acute and chronic health conditions and movement disorders. Physiotherapists utilise clinical skills, from diagnostic assessment and analysis of pathophysiology to therapeutic interventions across a broad range of modalities including manual therapy, manual and therapeutic exercise and progression of treatment plans. Physiotherapists engage in the prevention and management of recovery and rehabilitation, they work across many areas including musculoskeletal, neurological, oncological, paediatric and cardiorespiratory practice.

1	Physiotherapists can diagnose	Physiotherapists diagnose injuries and recognise disorders involving all major body systems.
2	Physiotherapists use clinical reasoning to determine diagnosis and optimal treatment	Physiotherapists have clinical skills across all anatomical domains and use evidence-based clinical reasoning to assist and advise medical practitioners in ongoing management.
3	Physiotherapists have a broad therapy base	Physiotherapists use manual therapy techniques to reduce pain, facilitate the recovery of normal movement and rehabilitate patients using specifically designed exercise programs .
4	Physiotherapists are both internally and externally regulated	Physiotherapists are a registered profession and practise within their scope under the legislatively protected title 'physiotherapist' under the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law.

What exercise physiologists do

Exercise physiologists primarily manage patients using clinical exercise interventions as their main modality.

Exercise physiologists **prescribe exercise** to improve the physical function and quality of life of people with chronic conditions and health issues and to prevent deconditioning in the healthy population. Exercise physiologists focus on the physiology of physical exercise, including how the body responds and adapts to different physical exercises. They put together individual exercise programs, provide counselling on how to maintain an active lifestyle and make sure that exercise programs are safe, effective and appropriate for the person.

1	Exercise physiologists do not diagnose	Exercise physiologists take the diagnosis made by a physiotherapist or medical practitioner and provide an exercise intervention based on the medical or clinical diagnosis and recommendations for recovery.
2	Exercise physiologists focus on clinical exercise prescription	Exercise physiologists have knowledge of the risks and benefits of distinct forms of exercise.
3	Exercise physiologists' scope is focused around exercise	Exercise physiologists primarily manage patients using clinical exercise interventions as their main modality.
4	Exercise physiologists are self-regulated	Exercise physiologists are self-regulated through their governing body Exercise and Sports Science Australia and are not required to meet practice standards within the National Law.