Starting Physical Therapy Before Transplant

While waiting on the national transplant waiting list, many transplant patients feel helpless about their ability to manage their health. A positive thing patients waiting for an organ transplant can do is prepare their bodies as much as possible to endure surgery and beyond. Taking part in exercise and physical therapy before transplant surgery is often called ‘prehab’. Building endurance, stamina and strength with a physical therapist allows patients to exercise while being closely monitored.

With certain stipulations and criteria that need to be maintained to remain eligible for transplant, it is critical for pre-transplant patients to be proactive in maximizing their potential for a successful outcome. Participating in physical therapy can improve your chances of a better experience after transplant surgery.

No two transplant patients are alike, and neither are their pre-transplant physical therapy experiences. Common areas of focus that are often included in pre-rehab physical therapy sessions include:

- Increasing stamina by walking predetermined distances in a given time
- Building strength and endurance through exercises
- Gaining or losing weight
- Education about physical therapy needs after transplant surgery

Because these activities can be extremely challenging while many patients are at their physical worst, a physical therapist can help manage through challenges in order for you to continue to exercise in a safe way based on your oxygen needs and baseline abilities.

After transplant, it is not unusual for post-transplant patients to be bed bound for two to four days, sometimes longer. While this is expected after surgery, it affects the body’s ability to maintain muscle and bone strength due to an extended period without moving. Physical therapy prior to transplant can improve strength to help manage some of the effects that surgery and the initial recovery can have on the body.
During recovery after transplant, physical therapy will begin while still in the hospital in an acute-setting. **Acute therapy** evaluates patients and provides post acute-care recommendations for further physical therapy. In most cases, transplant patients will continue physical therapy in an outpatient setting once being cleared by their doctor. By participating in prehab before transplant, recipients have a strong foundation to optimize their post-transplant therapies, in addition to having a clearer understanding of what is involved and expected of them by their physical therapist.

Before starting any physical therapy or exercise program, it is important to discuss options with your transplant doctor. [For more information about physical therapy services through the continuum of Penn Medicine, click here.](#)

### About the blogger:

Sarah has been a physical therapist assistant for over seven years, passionate about teaching and interacting with patients to improve their quality of life and happiness. She currently provides care to pre and post lung transplant patients in acute and outpatient settings, with special interests in the cardiopulmonary system and pain science. She prioritizes evidence-based interventions, patient engagement and understanding for optimal outcomes. She graduated from Mount Aloysius College with an Associate's degree in Applied Science for physical therapist assistant. She is currently working on her Bachelor's degree in healthcare administration.