

# Role of Physical Therapy Intervention in Patients with Life-Threatening Illnesses: A Systematic Review

**Reference:** Putt et al. American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Medicine 2017, Vol. 34(2) 186-196.

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## **Abstract:**

**Background:** Physical Therapy encompasses the skilled treatment and care for patients across the life span through a multitude of different practice settings. This includes caring for individuals within end-of-life or palliative care settings. The goal of treatment in this stage of care is to relieve physical, social, psychological and spiritual suffering in order to improve overall quality of life in patients with terminal illnesses. There has been limited research conducted to investigate the utilization of physical therapy interventions in palliative care settings.

**Objective:** To contribute to the current research involving physical therapy and end-of-life care in terms of its efficacy, value and how this value is perceived by patients and their caregivers.

**Method:** Studies related to this topic published between 1994-2014 were independently screened and reviewed.

**Results:** Thirteen qualitative studies were selected which met all inclusion criteria and discussed the role of physical therapy intervention in the palliative care setting. Methodological quality of the articles were assessed and their findings were summarized and presented. All articles support the utilization of physical therapy in palliative care settings and emphasize the impact of physical therapy on improving patients' social, physical, and emotional well-being.

## **Strengths:**

- outlined inclusion criteria and article selection process well
- All studies were summarized in an easily interpreted table for quick reference
- Identified common themes in the physical therapy literature

## **Weaknesses:**

- actual interventions were not well-defined in the studies
- most studies identified that patients were receiving multidisciplinary support so difficult to determine if the physio was what was responsible for the improvements seen
- no quantitative data was presented
- no discussion of financial costs of physical therapy
- high attrition of clients in the studies (discharges, became too ill to participate, patients passed away)
- lack of a consistent rating tool for assessment

**Relevance to Palliative Care:** The number of patients receiving palliative and end of life care is steadily increasing. These patients tend to have decreasing functional abilities which can affect their quality of life, and so physical therapy aimed at promoting safety and maintaining or regaining physical independence can be a reasonable goal for certain groups of these patients. Given that many of the diagnoses seen with these individuals are progressively worsening in nature, the fact that Physical therapists are uniquely trained to modify their treatments and care based upon the needs of the individual in the specific stage of his or her disease is a definite asset.