

Informed Consent: A Simple but Essential Part of Physical Therapy

Informed consent is one of the most important parts of providing safe, ethical physical therapy care. At its core, it means making sure patients understand what you're recommending, why you're recommending it, and what their choices are. It also means respecting their right to say yes, no, or to change their mind at any time.

Informed consent protects patients by helping them understand risks, benefits, and alternatives to treatment. It supports patient autonomy, allowing individuals to make decisions based on their own goals and values. When patients feel included in these conversations, trust grows, communication improves, and outcomes often improve as well.

The process of informed consent should be simple and clear. Therapists should explain the planned treatment in everyday language, describe possible risks and expected benefits, and discuss other options when they exist. It's also helpful to review likely costs and how long treatment may take. Patients should always have the chance to ask questions. Just as important, therapists must document what was discussed and how the patient responded, whether consent was verbal, written, or implied.

Two types of consent are common in physical therapy. **Explicit consent** is when a patient clearly agrees—either verbally or in writing. **Implied consent** happens through a patient's actions, such as moving into position for treatment. While implied consent is appropriate for routine, low-risk activities, explicit consent is important when risks are higher or when introducing a new intervention. Only the physical therapist—not support staff—may obtain initial consent, and consent should be revisited if the plan of care changes.

A patient must also have the capacity to give consent. This includes being able to understand the information, apply it to their own situation, weigh options, and communicate a decision. Adults are assumed to have capacity unless there is evidence otherwise, and minors usually need a parent or guardian to consent for them.

Good documentation is the final step. Recording what you explained, how the patient responded, and any educational materials provided, protects both the patient and the therapist. Written consent is helpful when there are serious risks, but a well-documented conversation is often enough.

In the end, informed consent is not just a box to check—it's an ongoing partnership between therapist and patient. By keeping communication clear and respectful, Minnesota physical therapists and physical therapist assistants can ensure that patients stay informed, engaged, and empowered throughout their care.

For more information visit FSBPT Free Resources: [Informed Consent](#)