

Preparing for the Geriatric Certified Specialist Exam

The Geriatric Certified Specialist (GCS) Exam, administered by the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialist (ABPTS), is a certification process for physical therapists that are committed to providing the best evidence-based care to older adults. Preparation for the GCS exam requires a commitment of time, energy and focus to the entire process in order to be successful. This outline is designed to help you in your preparation for the specialist exam. It does not attempt to provide an exhaustive list of resources nor a foolproof way of studying. Reviewing and using the resources on this list does not guarantee passing the exam.

This list was prepared by the Practice Committee of the Academy of Geriatric Physical Therapy as a service to therapists taking the GCS exam and reflects not only its work but also feedback of those who have taken the exam previously.

According to ABPTS, “specialization is the process by which a physical therapist builds on a broad base of professional education and practice to develop a greater depth of knowledge and skills related to a particular area of practice.” Geriatric Certified Specialists treat in a wide variety of settings (e.g. acute hospital, rehabilitation units, home care, private practice, skilled nursing facilities, assisted living units) and to a diverse clientele. Preparation for the exam must take into account the management of patients over a large age range (65+) and with complex acute and chronic medical histories.

To begin your application process:

1. Request all application materials from American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties (ABPTS) at <http://www.abpts.org>.
2. Review requirements thoroughly and ensure that you have enough clinical hours in the specialty to sit for the exam or that you have satisfied the requirements to sit based on completion of an accredited residency program in geriatrics.
3. Create a timeline for yourself that includes time to complete the application process, gather resources, talk and collaborate with others, and thoroughly study for all the elements of the exam.

Suggestions for Studying for the GCS Exam

- There is no official preparatory course for the GCS exam. Sample questions are available in the information booklet provided by the ABPTS. Review the practice questions provided and consider how to study for questions that are worded in multiple-choice style where there aren't necessarily wrong answers but best/better answers. <http://www.abpts.org/Certification/Geriatrics/>
- Enrollment in an APTA accredited Geriatric Clinical Residency Program is an excellent way to acquire the skills and knowledge that can help you be successful on the GCS exam. Residency programs are designed specifically to train graduates to become GCS's. These programs typically take about one year to complete and offer 1:1 mentoring throughout the year with experts, including GCS's. For a list of APTA accredited residency programs in geriatric PT, visit: <http://www.abptrfe.org/apta/abptrfe/Directory.aspx?navID=10737432672>
- Become a member of the Academy of Geriatric Physical Therapy (AGPT) to receive the peer reviewed

Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy (JGPT) and other resources that are produced by the Academy (e.g., evidence-based resources, GeriNotes, and Special Interest Group updates). The JGPT for the iPad is available on the Apple app store for free. Dissemination of information to members of the Academy is made through email blast, via listserv, Facebook, Twitter and RSS. It is suggested you sign up for the listserv, and “like” or “follow” the Academy on social media.

- Evaluate the time you will need to prepare for the certification exam. Six months is most likely the minimum one should consider though everyone learns at different paces; this is a recommendation only. The Description of Specialty Practice on the APTA online store includes a self-assessment tool so you can determine areas to focus your review.
<http://iweb.apta.org/Purchase/CatalogSearchResults.aspx?Option=1&ProductTypeText=All&ProductTypeValue=All&Title=DSP&Author=&ProductDesc=&TitleText=Item+Number+or+Title+contains&AuthorText=Author+Name+contains&ProductDescText=Item+Description+contains>. You can also use the examination outline as a guideline for review:
<http://www.abpts.org/Resources/ExamOutlines/Geriatics/>
- Use PTNow. This is APTA’s invaluable resource and portal for evidence-based practice. Members of APTA have access to >4,500 journals (full text); Rehab Reference Center (which includes >1,000 peer reviewed clinical summaries, >11,500 drug fact sheets, patient education materials on hundreds of diagnoses, the entire VHI exercise library, and more); a searchable database for clinical practice guidelines, a searchable database for tests and measures (fully interfaced with RehabMeasures.org), and more. This resource is an *excellent* way to keep informed of evidence and to use as a point of care guide for daily patient management. www.PTNow.org.
- Schedule a set number of hours each day or week to specifically study evidenced-based literature and from the recommended texts (see end of this document).
- Acquire and study as many Home Study Modules produced by the Academy as possible. These courses provide education covering the breadth and depth of a variety of settings and diagnoses in which GCS Physical Therapists currently work. In particular, the FOCUS courses have been particularly helpful for many exam takers (per testimonials and survey results). The other courses are of excellent quality as well; the distinguishing feature of the FOCUS courses is that it specifically addresses all of the physical therapist practice patterns and has been cross-linked to the Description of Specialty Practice. The Academy updates all recurrent courses (e.g., the FOCUS Course Series) approximately every 5 years, so information is always current and topical. Home Study courses can also count towards CEU requirements in most states. <http://learningcenter.apta.org/student/MyCourse.aspx?id=14d72e66-b12f-429b-a842-5e328e618c78&programid=dcca7f06-4cd9-4530-b9d3-4ef7d2717b5d>
- Check and register for upcoming Certified Exercise Expert for Aging Adults (CEEAA™) course series in your area. <https://geriatricspt.org/events/courses/ceeaa/>
- Evaluate and treat as many geriatric patient/clients with varying diagnoses in your setting. Visit and observe in as many treatment settings as possible to have first-hand knowledge of the types of patients/clients and diagnoses treated by physical therapists in a variety of practice settings.

- Find a mentor. Someone who is currently a GCS who is willing to share knowledge, materials, and time with you. <http://www.abpts.org/FindaSpecialist/>
- Review archived issues of the JGPT: <http://journals.lww.com/jgpt/pages/default.aspx>
- Investigate the current offerings of online courses available on the Academy's website: <http://learningcenter.apta.org/AdvancedSearch.aspx?Keyword=Geriatrics>
- Attend the APTA Combined Sections Meetings to become immersed in the field; attending courses, studying posters, visiting the AGPT booth, talking to authors and authorities in the field, and receiving first-hand experience with the many therapists who have successfully attained certification.
- Though the certification exam is heavily weighted in clinical practice, there may be questions related to health care policy, public health knowledge, management principles, etc. It is best to keep a broad perspective in these areas as this represents national viewpoints and not individual carrier or fiscal intermediary policies. Therefore, we suggest the best resource for policy learning and understanding Medicare implications is the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS). There are multiple self-paced, self-learning modules available. Since Medicaid criteria vary from state to state, it is unlikely questions will reflect this type of public programming. <https://www.cms.gov/outreach-and-education/medicare-learning-network-mln/mlngeninfo/index.html>
- Carefully choose continuing education courses that are NOT sponsored by either AGPT, APTA or one of its components. Though many advertise as geriatric courses, one must make sure that the techniques and learning objectives actually represent evidence-based care versus novel concepts and or unproven, complementary-type treatment approaches. Furthermore, it is important that you are aware of the intended audience and the instructor qualifications. These vary widely and definitely impact the level of instruction. Caveat emptor!
- Join or form study groups with others in your area who are preparing to take the exam as well.
- Check if you can get access to e-books or printed copies of textbooks through your company or university's library. Amazon and other online vendors may offer textbook rentals, which are frequently cheaper as compared to buying.

Suggested Texts and Resources (not an exhaustive list):

- Academy of Geriatrics. Geriatric FOCUS. 2012. Available through the APTA Learning Center. Course Code: LMSK-0002. <http://learningcenter.apta.org/student/MyCourse.aspx?id=7afda175-e9fe-4add-99bb-6c441e6178bd&programid=dcca7f06-4cd9-4530-b9d3-4ef7d2717b5d>
- American College of Sports Medicine. ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription. 9th ed. Baltimore, MD. Lippincott Williams and Wilkins; 2013. ISBN 13: 978-1609139551

- APTA. Self-Assessment Tool included with the Description of Specialty. Available free with exam registration or for purchase at:
<http://iweb.apta.org/Purchase/CatalogSearchResults.aspx?Option=1&ProductTypeText=All&ProductTypeValue=All&Title=DSP&Author=&ProductDesc=&TitleText=Item+Number+or+Title+contains&AuthorText=Author+Name+contains&ProductDescText=Item+Description+contains>
- Ciccone C. *Pharmacology in Rehabilitation (Contemporary Perspectives in Rehabilitation)*. 5th ed. Philadelphia, PA. F.A. Davis; 2015. ISBN 13: 978-0803640290.
- Goodman C, Fuller K. *Pathology: Implications for the Physical Therapist*. 4th ed, St. Louis, Mo. Elsevier/Saunders; 2014. ISBN 13: 978-1455745913
- Guccione A, Wong R, Avers D. *Geriatric Physical Therapy*. 3rd ed. St. Louis, MO. Elsevier/Mosby; 2012. ISBN 13: 978-0323029483.
- Kauffman T, Scott R, Barr J, Moran M. *A Comprehensive Guide to Geriatric Rehabilitation*. 3rd ed. Churchill Livingstone; 2014. ISBN 13: 978-0702045882.
- Medbridge Physical Therapy Courses related to Geriatrics. Available online at: <https://www.medbridgeeducation.com/>
- O'Sullivan S, Schmitz T, Fulk G. *Physical Rehabilitation*. 6th ed. Philadelphia, PA. F.A. Davis; 2013. ISBN 13: 978-0803625792
- Paz j, West M. *Acute Care Handbook for Physical Therapists*. 4th ed. St. Louis, Mo. Elsevier/Saunders; 2013. ISBN 13: 978-1455728961.
- Shumway-Cook A, Woodlacott M. *Motor Control: Translating Research into Clinical Practice*. 4th ed. Lippincott Williams and Wilkins; 2011.
- Staples W. *Geriatric Physical Therapy: A Case Study Approach*. McGraw Hill; 2016. ISBN 13: 9780071825429.