

# Physical Therapy and Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)

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## Fact Sheet

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Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease) is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects the motor neurons in the brain and spinal cord. These are the nerve cells that control the muscles of the body. Over time, people with ALS become very weak in most of their muscles. ALS symptoms progress at different rates in different people. Initial presentation and order of symptoms are variable, but may include:

- Foot drop & difficulty walking
- Hand weakness and trouble with coordination
- Cramping, stiffness, and twitching of muscles
- Generalized weakness and muscle atrophy
- Difficulty with speaking and swallowing
- Neck and back weakness
- Impaired breathing

### How can a physical therapist help?

A physical therapist (PT) is a healthcare professional who is trained to evaluate and treat problems related to movement and function. Physical therapy helps people with ALS learn how to be prepared for changes in their function, and to navigate these changes as their illness progresses. The goal of PT is not to re-build muscles, but rather to maintain fitness, flexibility, safe mobility, and independence as long as possible.

- **Exercises** will be recommended to keep muscles flexible and maintain strength. It is important to avoid aggressive exercises of the muscles affected by ALS. Stretching is very important as areas of the body get weak. Breathing exercises may also be indicated. A PT can prescribe an individualized program.

- As **balance and walking** become difficult, canes, walkers and other mobility devices may be issued for safety. A PT can recommend fall prevention strategies and balance exercises.

- **Braces** may be recommended to decrease pain and improve positioning. Examples include ankle braces to prevent tripping if foot drop is present, or neck bracing to promote good posture for breathing and pain prevention if the neck muscles become weak.

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- As walking ability declines, manual and power **wheelchairs** may be recommended to maximize mobility and improve positioning. PTs can determine the wheelchair features that are necessary to maximize independence.
- **Home evaluations** can be provided by PTs for safety recommendations and advice on potential modifications to the home. Equipment may be recommended to aid in daily care activities. It is recommended to begin any alterations to the home sooner rather than later due to ALS being progressive in nature.
- **Pain management** by a PT can include stretching, massage, positioning, and recommendations for pressure relief. Pain is not a primary symptom of ALS but can sometimes occur with immobility.
- **Caregiver support and education** is important. PTs can teach safe ways to help a person with ALS move, such as help with walking, moving in bed, and getting out of chairs. Equipment such as gait belts or mechanical lifts could be recommended. PTs can also provide education to caregivers on how to help with stretching exercises.

## How to access physical therapy services

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## References:

ALS Association: <https://www.als.org>

MD Association: [Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis \(ALS\) - Diseases | Muscular Dystrophy Association \(mda.org\)](https://www.mda.org/diseases/amyotrophic-lateral-sclerosis-als)

For more information exercise with ALS, refer to separate fact sheet "Exercise with ALS" from Academy of Neurologic Physical Therapy