

improvements," Dr. Gamboa says. Half of people who start an exercise program drop out within six months, partly because of "fear, discomfort and lack of confidence," she says.

Physical therapists often charge far more than \$100 an hour, well above the cost of a personal trainer. Insurance companies tend not to cover the cost of physical therapy without a physician's referral; referrals are often limited to patients recovering from injuries, accidents or surgery. After receiving a fitness program from a physical therapist, many patients will, like Ms. Esparza, hire a personal trainer to implement it. But prevention is where many physical therapists say their profession could make the most difference.

A large percentage of aging athletes eventually suffer sprains, strains, overuse injuries and joint pain, and as part of their recovery they go to a physical therapist who focuses on resolving inflammation, restoring flexibility and developing a more-efficient and balanced program.

A proactive visit to a physical therapist can reveal the muscle imbalances and inefficient movement patterns that cause injury. The therapist can provide a regime that corrects those problems while enhancing endurance, balance, strength and weight control.

The American College of Sports Medicine says that it has certified hundreds of physical therapists and that it has no official position on whether injured athletes should seek help first from a physician or physical therapist.

Even so, fitness trainers shouldn't attempt to treat, and certainly shouldn't ignore, sports injuries, says Diane Buchta, spokeswoman for IDEA, a trainer organization. "We must refer those clients to a physician," she adds. Of course, many personal trainers specialize in treating the aging population. But the credentials of personal trainers can range from doctorate-level academic degrees to little or no certification at all. To address that problem, officials at IDEA recently established FitnessConnect, an online directory of more than 100,000 trainers with verified credentials.

Physical therapy "is largely built on the sciences of anatomy, biomechanics, exercise science and movement analysis," Carl DeRosa, a doctor of physical therapy at Northern Arizona University. That combination, he says, provides "a comprehensive and efficient 'start-to-finish' service to recreational athletes."

In five states, a physician's referral is required for patient visits to a physical therapist. Elsewhere such restrictions have been eliminated, and physical therapists are allowed to diagnose and treat conditions involving impaired movement. Not all physical therapists are sports-medicine specialists, however. The Find-A-PT link on the Web site of the physical therapy association lists 15 specialties other than sports medicine, including wound management, wheelchair mobility and hand rehabilitation.

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