



# Empowering Physiotherapists to Order Diagnostic Imaging

17 October 2024

## RECOMMENDATION

**As a first step in harmonizing scope of practice across the country, we recommend that the federal government actively encourage provinces and territories to take action that allows physiotherapists to order diagnostic imaging across the country.**

## WHAT THIS WILL DO

Empowering physiotherapists to order diagnostic imaging directly will reduce wait times and lead to quicker initiation of care for patients, helping to prevent further deterioration and resulting in better health outcomes for Canadians.

## OTHER BENEFITS

This shift can also help to alleviate the current burden on physicians and other healthcare providers, allowing them to focus their expertise on more complex cases.

To optimize Canada's healthcare system, every healthcare professional must be enabled to operate at their full potential. This includes physiotherapists, who possess extensive training and are well-equipped to make decisions about the need for diagnostic imaging based on their comprehensive assessments.

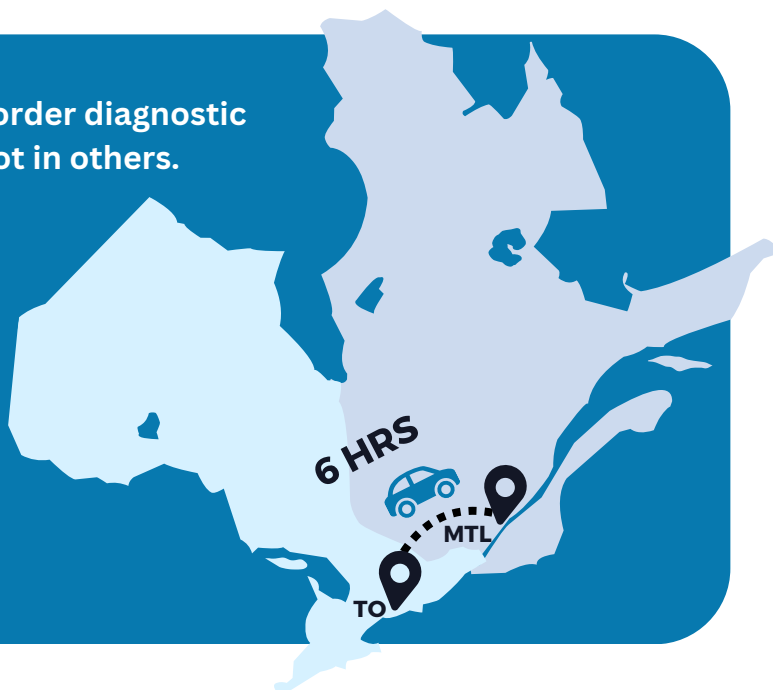
## BACKGROUND

Currently, physiotherapists can only order diagnostic imaging in some provinces — such as Quebec, Alberta, and Nova Scotia — but not others. This inconsistency hinders physiotherapists' ability to contribute fully to patient care and creates inefficiencies in health care delivery.

**Currently, physiotherapists can order diagnostic imaging in some provinces but not in others.**

For example, ordering diagnostic imaging (x-rays) is within scope of practice in the province of Quebec as an authorized act.

In Ontario, the ability for physiotherapists to order diagnostic imaging is still pending the completion of regulatory changes.



The CPA was thrilled to see scope advocacy traction in 2024 in Nova Scotia,<sup>[1]</sup> where advocacy resulted in physiotherapy professionals in private practice being able to refer patients for X-rays.

**“ This announcement [from February 2024] will optimize the scope of practice for Nova Scotia physiotherapists who work in private practice and as a result, improve timely access for patients needing general radiography. It will save patients from unnecessary additional appointments to get a requisition if an X-ray is deemed necessary. We are excited to better support our patients and help them efficiently navigate the healthcare system. ”**

— Nova Scotia Physiotherapy Association President, Monica MacDonald

## WHERE IT'S WORKING

- 1 In Quebec, ordering diagnostic imaging has been within physiotherapy scope of practice as an authorized act since **2020**.
- 2 With additional authorization from the College of Physiotherapists of Alberta, physiotherapists have been authorized to order x-rays, magnetic resonance imaging, and ultrasound imaging since **2011**.

Improved outcomes of the ability to order diagnostic imaging include decreased costs, reduced wait times for surgery, reductions in referral duplication/pathway length, improved satisfaction among patients and earlier diagnoses.

### What is 'diagnostic imaging'?

A range of medical imaging techniques that visualize the internal structures of the body to diagnose diseases, injuries, or conditions. Common forms include x-rays, MRIs, CT scans, and ultrasounds, which provide detailed insights necessary to determine appropriate physiotherapy intervention.



## THE EVIDENCE

Allowing physiotherapists to work to their full scope and order diagnostic imaging in all provinces and territories will:

- Reduce wait times for imaging and treatment.[\[2,3\]](#)
- Prevent further health deterioration for patients.[\[4\]](#)
- Improve patient outcomes and experiences.[\[5\]](#)
- Decrease the burden on other healthcare providers, leading to a more efficient system.[\[6\]](#)
- Create equity in patient experiences across Canada.

If no action is taken, patients face continued delays in treatment and care, worsening patient outcomes, and sustained inefficiencies in the health care system.

# CITATIONS

- [1] Nova Scotia Health. (8 February 2024). Physiotherapists across Nova Scotia will soon be able to request X-rays. Retrieved online <https://www.nshealth.ca/news-and-notice/physiotherapists-across-nova-scotia-will-soon-be-able-request-x-rays>
- [2] Gunnel Peterson, Marie Portström, Jens Frick, Extended roles in primary care when physiotherapist-initiated referral to X-ray can save time and reduce costs, *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, Volume 33, Issue 3, 2021, mzab122, <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzab122>
- [3] College of Physiotherapists of Alberta. (September 29, 2022). Public Funding for Diagnostic Imaging Ordered by Physiotherapists. Retrieved online: <https://www.cpta.ab.ca/news-and-updates/news/public-funding-for-diagnostic-imaging-ordered-by-physiotherapists/>
- [4] Sarah R Golding, Jo Jackson. (December 9, 2023). First contact physiotherapists: are they able to reduce the burden on rheumatology services? A critical review of the evidence base, *Rheumatology Advances in Practice*, Volume 8, Issue 1, 2024, rkad109, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rap/rkad109>
- [5] Lewis AK, Harding KE, Snowdon DA, Taylor NF. (2018). Reducing wait time from referral to first visit for community outpatient services may contribute to better health outcomes: a systematic review. *BMC Health Serv Res*. 2018 Nov 20;18(1):869. doi: 10.1186/s12913-018-3669-6. PMID: 30458761; PMCID: PMC6245820.
- [6] Gunnel Peterson, Marie Portström, Jens Frick. (September 2021). Extended roles in primary care when physiotherapist-initiated referral to X-ray can save time and reduce costs, *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, Volume 33, Issue 3, 2021, mzab122, <https://doi.org/10.1093/intqhc/mzab122>

## About the Canadian Physiotherapy Association

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association represents physiotherapy professionals, including registered physiotherapists, physiotherapist assistants, physiotherapy technologists and students across Canada. Physiotherapy professionals provide essential expertise, rehabilitative care, and treatment, enabling Canadians to live well and actively participate in all facets of their lives.

## For more information

Please review the full CPA [Pre-Budget submission](#) or contact Kayla Scott, Senior Director of Advocacy at [kscott@physiotherapy.ca](mailto:kscott@physiotherapy.ca)

