OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSISTANT (OTA)

Occupational Therapy Assistants (OTAs or COTAs) work under the direction of occupational therapists in treating patients with injuries, illnesses, or disabilities through the therapeutic use of everyday activities. They help these patients develop, recover, and improve the skills needed for daily living and working.

Occupational therapy assistants typically do the following:

- Help patients do therapeutic activities, such as stretches and other exercises
- Lead children who have developmental disabilities in play activities that promote coordination and socialization
- Encourage patients to complete activities and tasks
- Teach patients how to use special equipment – for example, showing a patient with Parkinson’s disease how to use devices that make eating easier
- Record patients’ progress, report to occupational therapists, and do other administrative tasks

Occupational therapy assistants collaborate with occupational therapists to develop and carry out a treatment plan for each patient. Activities described in plans range from teaching the proper way for patients to move from a bed into a wheelchair to advising patients on the best way to stretch their muscles. For example, an occupational therapy assistant might work with injured workers to help them get back into the workforce by teaching them how to work around lost motor skills. Occupational therapy assistants also may work with people who have learning disabilities, teaching them skills that allow them to be more independent.

Assistants monitor activities to make sure that patients are doing them correctly. They record the patient’s progress and provide feedback to the occupational therapist so that the therapist can change the treatment plan if the patient is not getting the desired results.

IMPORTANT QUALITIES

- **Compassion.** Occupational therapy assistants frequently work with patients who struggle with many of life’s basic activities. As a result, they should be compassionate and caring and have the ability to encourage others.
- **Flexibility.** Assistants must be flexible when treating patients. Because not every type of therapy will work for each patient, assistants may need to be creative when working with occupational therapists to determine the best type of therapy to use for achieving a patient’s goals.
- **Detail oriented.** Occupational therapy assistants must be able to quickly and accurately follow the instructions, both written and spoken, of an occupational therapist.
- **Interpersonal skills.** Occupational therapy assistants spend much of their time interacting with patients. They should be friendly and courteous, and they should be able to communicate with patients to the extent of their ability and training.
- **Physical strength.** Occupational therapy assistants need to have a moderate degree of strength because of the physical exertion required to assist patients. Constant kneeling, stooping, and standing for long periods also are part of the job.

Education

Occupational therapy assistants typically need an **associate’s degree** from an accredited program. Occupational therapy assistant programs are commonly found in community colleges and technical schools. In 2014, there were more than 200 occupational therapy assistant programs accredited by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, a branch of the [American Occupational Therapy Association](https://www.aota.org).
These programs generally require 2 years of full-time study and include instruction in subjects such as psychology, biology, and pediatric health. In addition to taking coursework, occupational therapy assistants must complete at least 16 weeks of fieldwork to gain hands-on work experience.

People interested in becoming an occupational therapy assistant should take high school courses in biology and health education. They also can increase their chances of getting into a community college or technical school program by doing volunteer work in a healthcare setting, such as a nursing care facility, an occupational therapist’s office, or a physical therapist’s office.

- Eastern Virginia Career College – Fredericksburg, VA
- Jefferson College of Health Sciences – Roanoke, VA
- Northern Virginia Community College – Springfield, VA
- Southwest Virginia Community College – Richlands, VA
- Tidewater Community College – Virginia Beach, VA
- Virginia Highlands Community College – Abington, VA
- Virginia College – Richmond, VA

Licenses, Certifications, & Registrations
Nearly all states require occupational therapy assistants to be licensed or registered. Licensure typically requires the completion of an accredited occupational therapy assistant education program, completion of all fieldwork requirements, and passing the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT) exam. In Virginia contact: https://www.dhp.virginia.gov/medicine/advisory/ot/faq.asp

Occupational therapy assistants must pass the NBCOT exam to use the title “Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant” (COTA). They must also take continuing education classes to maintain their certification. The American Occupational Therapy Association also offers a number of specialty certifications for occupational therapy assistants who want to demonstrate their specialized level of knowledge, skills, and abilities in specialized areas of practice such as low vision or feeding, eating and swallowing.

Average Salary
The median annual wage for occupational therapy assistants was $56,950 in May 2014. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $36,420, and the highest 10 percent earned more than $76,790.

In May 2014, the median annual wages for occupational therapy assistants in the top industries in which they worked were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Median Annual Wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home healthcare services</td>
<td>$63,480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing care facilities (skilled nursing facilities)</td>
<td>$61,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physical, occupational and speech therapists, and audiologists</td>
<td>$58,970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals; state, local, and private</td>
<td>$51,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational services; state, local, and private</td>
<td>$45,030</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Job Outlook

Employment of occupational therapy assistants is projected to grow **43 percent** from 2014 to 2024, much faster than the average for all occupations.

Demand for occupational therapy is likely to grow over the coming decade in response to the health needs of the aging baby-boom generation and a growing elderly population. Older adults are more prone than younger people to conditions and ailments such as arthritis and stroke. These conditions can affect one’s ability to perform a variety of everyday activities. Occupational therapy assistants and aides will be needed to help occupational therapists in caring for these patients. Occupational therapy will also continue to be used to treat children and young adults with developmental disabilities, such as autism.

In addition, demand for occupational therapy assistants is likely to stem from healthcare providers (especially long-term care facilities, such as nursing homes) employing more assistants to reduce the cost of occupational therapy services. After the therapist has evaluated a patient and designed a treatment plan, the occupational therapy assistant can provide many aspects of the treatment that the therapist prescribed.

Demand for occupational therapy services is related to the ability of patients to pay, either directly or through health insurance. The number of individuals who have access to health insurance is expected to continue to increase because of federal health insurance reform. Both rehabilitation and habilitation services are included among essential health benefits to be covered by insurers; however, coverage may vary by state. Occupational therapy assistants will be needed to help therapists treat additional patients and to ensure that treatment facility operations run smoothly.

Occupational therapy assistants with experience working in an occupational therapy office or other healthcare setting should have the best job opportunities

Working Conditions

The hours and days that occupational therapy assistants work vary with the facility and with whether they are full- or part-time employees. Many outpatient therapy offices and clinics have evening and weekend hours, to help coincide with patients’ personal schedules.

The industries that employed the most occupational therapy assistants in 2014 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physical, occupational and speech therapists, and audiologists</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing care facilities (skilled nursing facilities)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals; state, local, and private</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home healthcare services</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational services; state, local, and private</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Occupational therapy assistants spend much of their time on their feet, setting up equipment and, in the case of assistants, working with patients. Constant kneeling and stooping are part of the job, as is the need to sometimes lift patients.
Professional Associations
American Occupational Therapy Association
4720 Montgomery Avenue
P.O. Box 31220
Bethesda, MD 20824-1220
(301) 652-2682
http://www.aota.org

Virginia Occupational Therapy Association
1111 N. Fairfax St.
Alexandria, VA 22314
(800) 999-2782 ext. 3235, ext. 3235
http://www.vpta.org