OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST

Occupational Therapists (OTs) treat 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 practitioners ask, “What matters to you?” not, “What’s the matter with you?”

In its simplest terms, occupational therapists help people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations). Common occupational therapy interventions include helping children with disabilities to participate fully in school and social situations, helping people recovering from injury to regain skills, and providing supports for older adults experiencing physical and cognitive changes. Occupational therapy services typically include:

- an individualized evaluation, during which the client/family and occupational therapist determine the person’s goals,
- customized intervention to improve the person’s ability to perform daily activities and reach the goals, and
- an outcomes evaluation to ensure that the goals are being met and/or make changes to the intervention plan.

Occupational therapy services may include comprehensive evaluations of the client’s home and other environments (e.g., workplace, school), recommendations for adaptive equipment and training in its use, and guidance and education for family members and caregivers. Occupational therapy practitioners have a holistic perspective, in which the focus is on adapting the environment to fit the person, and the person is an integral part of the therapy team.

DUTIES

Occupational therapists typically do the following:

- Observe patients doing tasks, ask them questions, and review their medical history
- Evaluate a patient’s condition and needs
- Develop a treatment plan for patients, laying out the types of activities and specific goals to be accomplished
- Help people with various disabilities with different tasks, such as leading an autistic child in play activities
- Demonstrate exercises—for example, joint stretches for arthritis relief—that can help relieve pain for people with chronic conditions
- Evaluate a patient’s home or workplace and, based on the patient’s health needs, identify potential improvements, such as labeling kitchen cabinets for an older person with poor memory
- Educate a patient’s family and employer about how to accommodate and care for the patient
- Recommend special equipment, such as wheelchairs and eating aids, and instruct patients on how to use that equipment
- Assess and record patients’ activities and progress for patient evaluations, for billing, and for reporting to physicians and other healthcare providers

Patients with permanent disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, often need help performing daily tasks. Therapists show patients how to use appropriate adaptive equipment, such as leg braces, wheelchairs, and eating aids. These devices help patients perform a number of daily tasks, allowing them to function more independently.

Some occupational therapists work with children in educational settings. They evaluate disabled children’s abilities, modify classroom equipment to accommodate children with certain disabilities, and help children participate in school activities.

Some therapists provide early intervention therapy to infants and toddlers who have, or are at risk of having, developmental delays.

Therapists who work with the elderly help their patients lead more independent and active lives. They assess patients’ abilities and environment and make recommendations. For example, therapists may identify potential fall hazards in a patient’s home and recommend their removal.

In some cases, occupational therapists help patients create functional work environments. They evaluate the work space, plan work activities, and meet with the patient’s employer to collaborate on changes to the patient’s
work environment or schedule.

Occupational therapists also may work in mental health settings where they help patients who suffer from developmental disabilities, mental illness, or emotional problems. They help these patients cope with, and engage in, daily life by teaching skills such as time management, budgeting, using public transportation, and doing household chores. In addition, therapists may work with individuals who have problems with drug abuse, alcoholism, depression, or other disorders. They may also work with people who have been through a traumatic event.

Some occupational therapists, such as those employed in hospitals, work as part of a healthcare team along with doctors, registered nurses, and other types of therapists. They may work with patients with chronic conditions, such as diabetes, or help rehabilitate a patient recovering from a hip replacement surgery. Occupational therapists also oversee the work of occupational therapy assistants and aides.

**IMPORTANT QUALITIES**

- **Communication Skills.** Occupational therapists have to be able to explain clearly what they want their patients to do.
- **Flexibility.** Occupational therapists must be flexible when treating patients. Because not every type of therapy will work for each patient, therapists may need to be creative when determining the treatment plans and adaptive devices that best suit each patient’s needs.
- **Compassion.** Occupational therapists are usually drawn to the profession by a desire to help people and improve the daily lives of others.
- **Patience.** Dealing with injuries, illnesses, and disabilities is frustrating for many people. Occupational therapists should be patient in order to provide quality care from the people they serve.
- **Interpersonal skills.** Because occupational therapists spend their time teaching and explaining therapies to patients, they should inspire trust and respect from their clients.
- **Listening skills.** Occupational therapists must be able to listen attentively to what their patients tell them.
- **Writing skills.** Occupational therapists must be able to explain clearly to others on the patient’s medical team what they are doing and how it is going.

**EDUCATION**

Most occupational therapists enter the occupation with a *master’s degree* in occupational therapy. In March 2013, there were 149 occupational therapy programs accredited by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education, part of the American Occupational Therapy Association; 145 are master’s degree programs and the remaining 4 are doctoral degree programs.

Admission to graduate programs in occupational therapy generally requires a bachelor’s degree and specific coursework, including biology and physiology. Many programs also require applicants to have volunteered or worked in an occupational therapy setting.

Master’s programs generally take 2 to 3 years to complete; doctoral programs take about 3 years. Some schools offer a dual-degree program in which the student earns a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in 5 years.

Both master’s and doctoral programs require at least 24 weeks of supervised fieldwork, in which prospective occupational therapists gain clinical work experience.

**Accredited Schools**

- James Madison University (Master’s degree)
- Jefferson College of Health Sciences (Master’s degree)
- Mary Baldwin College (Doctorate degree pending)
- Radford University (Master’s degree)
- Shenandoah University (Master’s degree pending)
- Virginia Commonwealth University (Master’s degree; Doctorate degree pending)

**LICENSURE/CERTIFICATION**

All states require occupational therapists to pass the national examination administered by the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapists (NBCOT). To sit for the NBCOT exam, candidates must have earned a degree from an accredited educational program and completed all fieldwork requirements.
Therapists must pass the NBCOT exam to use the title “Occupational Therapist Registered” (OTR). They must also take continuing education classes to maintain certification.

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) also offers a number of certifications for therapists who want to demonstrate their advanced level of knowledge in a specialty area, such as pediatrics, mental health, or low vision.

**WORKING CONDITIONS**

Therapists spend a lot of time on their feet working with patients. They also may be required to lift and move patients or heavy equipment. Many work in multiple facilities and have to travel from one job to another.

The industries that employed the most occupational therapists in 2012 were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals; state, local, and private</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physical, occupational and speech therapists, and audiologists</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary &amp; secondary schools</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing and residential care facilities</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home health care services</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**JOB OUTLOOK**

Employment of occupational therapists is projected to grow 29 percent from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. Occupational therapy will continue to be an important part of treatment for people with various illnesses and disabilities, such as Alzheimer’s disease, cerebral palsy, autism, or the loss of a limb.

The need for occupational therapists is expected to increase as the large baby-boom generation ages and people remain active later in life. Occupational therapists can help senior citizens maintain their independence by recommending home modifications and strategies that make daily activities easier. Therapists also play a large role in the treatment of many conditions and ailments commonly associated with aging, such as arthritis and stroke. They will also be needed in a variety of healthcare settings to act as part of a healthcare team in treating patients with chronic conditions, such as diabetes. Patients will continue to seek noninvasive outpatient treatment for long-term disabilities and illnesses, either in their homes or in residential care environments.

In addition, medical advances now enable more patients with critical problems such as birth defects or limb amputations to survive. These patients may need occupational therapy to perform a variety of daily tasks.

Demand for occupational therapy services will also stem from patients with autism spectrum disorder. As an increasing number of states require insurance companies to cover autism-related services, more therapists will be needed in schools to assist children with autism in improving their social skills and accomplishing a variety of daily tasks.

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 occupational therapy services may increase because of federal health insurance reform. Both rehabilitation and habilitation services are listed among the essential health benefits that insurers will need to cover once reforms are implemented.

Job opportunities should be good for licensed occupational therapists in all settings, particularly in acute hospital, rehabilitation, and orthopedic settings, because the elderly receive most of their treatment in these settings. Occupational therapists with specialized knowledge in a treatment area also will have better job prospects.

**AVERAGE SALARY**

The median annual wage for occupational therapists was $75,400 in May 2012. 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 $50,500, and the top 10 percent earned more than $107,070.
In May 2012, the median annual wages for occupational therapists in the top five industries in which these therapists worked were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nursing care facilities</td>
<td>$83,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home health care services</td>
<td>$82,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices of physical, occupational &amp; speech therapists, &amp; audiologists</td>
<td>$77,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals; state, local, and private</td>
<td>$75,140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary &amp; secondary schools</td>
<td>$66,610</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most occupational therapists worked full time in 2012. About 1 out of 4 worked part time. They may work nights or weekends, as needed, to accommodate patients’ schedules.

**PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**

**American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)**
4720 Montgomery Lane
Bethesda, MD 20814
Phone: 301-652-2682
Fax: 301-652-7711
[http://www.aota.org](http://www.aota.org)

**Virginia Occupational Therapy Association (VOTA)**
3720 Parchment Circle
Richmond, VA 23229
Phone: 804-754-24120
Email: office@vaoa.org