Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapists treat injured, ill, or disabled patients through the therapeutic use of everyday activities. They help these patients develop, recover, and improve the skills needed for daily living and working.

Occupational therapists typically do the following:

- Review patients’ medical history, ask the patients questions, and observe them doing tasks
- Evaluate a patient’s condition and needs
- Develop a treatment plan for patients, identifying specific goals and the types of activities that will be used to help the patient work toward those goals
- Help people with various disabilities with different tasks, such as teaching a stroke victim how to get dressed
- Demonstrate exercises—for example, stretching the joints for arthritis relief—that can help relieve pain in people with chronic conditions
- Evaluate a patient’s home or workplace and, on the basis of 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. Therapists also may 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 to improve the patients’ everyday lives. 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 workspace, recommend modifications, 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. Therapists teach these patients skills such as managing time, budgeting, using public transportation, and doing household chores in order to help them cope with, and engage in, daily life activities. 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, such as a car accident.

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 who have chronic conditions, such as diabetes, or help rehabilitate a patient recovering from hip replacement surgery.
Occupational therapists also oversee the work of occupational therapy assistants and aides.


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