

The Role of Occupational Therapy in Chronic Disease Management

Seventy five percent of health care dollars in the United States go toward treating chronic diseases (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014). Chronic conditions, such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, and obesity, are the leading causes of death and disability—and the most preventable (CDC, 2014). A fundamental component of health care reform being implemented as part of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) is an enhanced focus on primary care and the utilization of interprofessional teams to achieve the triple aim goals of improving the patient experience, improving the health of populations, and reducing the per capita cost of care. New models of primary care delivery are expected to be the best way to address the needs of the more than 133 million Americans with one or more chronic conditions as well as to enhance the health and wellness of the population as a whole (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014).



How Does Occupational Therapy Benefit Persons With Chronic Diseases?

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are health care professionals skilled in prevention, lifestyle modification, and physical and psychosocial rehabilitation. They focus on enabling individuals to participate in productive and meaningful activities of daily life through collaborating with clients and their caregivers during the evaluation and intervention process. This approach is particularly relevant to individuals who need to manage a chronic disease.

Depending on the nature and course of the specific condition(s), the occupational therapy goals for clients with chronic health conditions may include but are not limited to the following:

- Addressing performance deficits in daily self-care (ADLs) and home management tasks (instrumental ADLs), resulting from specific chronic conditions, to sustain or improve current status in these areas.
- Teaching strategies to incorporate energy conservation and activity modification techniques into daily activities to cope with physical demands and reduce the fatigue associated with many chronic conditions.
- Individualizing adaptations to effectively perform health management tasks (e.g., ensuring that someone with hand weakness is able to manage daily insulin shots for diabetes).
- Teaching and incorporating health management tasks into existing habits so they become part of the daily routine (e.g., setting up a schedule and reminder system to take medications).
- Developing coping strategies, behaviors, habits, routines, and lifestyle adaptations to support physical and psychosocial health and well-being.

Occupational Therapy and Self-Management

Self-management is about being in charge of one's life and managing one's condition, instead of being managed by that condition. Self-management is recognized as an effective approach to managing chronic health conditions by "empowering patients to understand their conditions and take responsibility for their health" (National Institutes of Health, 2010). The client-centered nature of occupational therapy is ideal to support self-management. Whether

a client is newly diagnosed or has experienced a chronic condition for many years, occupational therapy supports the challenge of managing the disease while also engaging in daily life activities.

Managing Daily Activities and Responsibilities

Living with a chronic condition may bring about changing physical abilities. Occupational therapy practitioners analyze the demands of activities that are meaningful to the client and evaluate the fit between abilities and challenges imposed by those activities and the environment. They may make recommendations on how to conserve energy, reduce or prevent pain, simplify the activities, and improve the safety and ease of functioning in a given environment (e.g., home, school, work).

Managing chronic conditions also involves learning specific health-management skills. These may include regularly monitoring blood pressure or weight; planning, shopping for, and preparing meals according to specific requirements or restrictions; monitoring blood glucose; administering oral, injected, or inhaled medications; or increasing physical activity. It is not enough for clients to learn and demonstrate these skills. To be effective, they must be consistently, habitually, and correctly performed; and they must be integrated into existing routines. Occupational therapy practitioners look at barriers that prevent clients from integrating health management tasks successfully into their daily routines and, if necessary, incorporate adaptations to overcome these barriers. They are particularly skilled in helping clients manage chronic conditions in a way that fits with existing routines and patterns so changes feel less disruptive and are more likely to be consistently integrated into daily routines.

Changing Thinking and Behaviors Related to Health Maintenance

Occupational therapy practitioners understand the emotional challenges associated with living with a chronic condition, such as anger and depression, feelings of uncertainty about the future, and changes in relationships with family and friends. They recognize that well-being is more than controlling symptoms or managing daily tasks and focus on what is meaningful to the client. Occupational therapy practitioners engage clients and their caregivers to take charge of their own care and to sustain the responsibilities and relationships important to them, thereby controlling the effects and progression of their condition to the extent possible.

Occupational therapy can be provided in a variety of venues, including the home, community clinics, rehab facilities, and physicians' offices. Evidence supports the efficacy and effectiveness of occupational therapy interventions that may be used in primary care settings to support the goals of the ACA (AOTA, 2014). Occupational therapy services enable individuals with chronic health conditions to continue to engage in meaningful activities, assume or maintain valued life roles, and participate as productive members of society.

References

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Occupational therapy enables people of all ages live life to its fullest by helping them to promote health, make lifestyle or environmental changes, and prevent—or live better with—injury, illness, or disability. By looking at the whole picture—a client's psychological, physical, emotional, and social make-up—occupational therapy assists people to achieve their goals, function at the highest possible level, maintain or rebuild their independence, and participate in the everyday activities of life.

