

## The Role of Occupational Therapy With Health Promotion

The path to health and well-being is intricately linked to participating in daily occupations. Occupational therapy focuses on enabling clients to maximize their capacity to participate in life activities that are important and meaningful to them, to promote overall health and wellness. Occupational therapy practitioners facilitate clients' abilities to adapt and organize their daily occupations or activities related to self-care, home management, community participation, education, work, and/or leisure into daily routines to prevent and minimize dysfunction, promote and develop a healthy lifestyle, and facilitate adaptation and recovery from injury, disease, or developmental challenges.

Chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes, obesity, and arthritis are among the most common, costly, and preventable health problems (CDC, 2014). An important component of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) is delivery system reforms that have triggered a focus on health care teams to manage chronic conditions, in order to improve overall health and reduce health care costs. Occupational therapy services can be particularly effective in assisting individuals to manage chronic diseases more effectively, thereby improving their quality of life and ability to engage in meaningful occupations, while decreasing frequency of medical interventions.

Another important component of the ACA is the inclusion of essential health benefits, one category of which is rehabilitative and habilitative services and devices. This provision has important implications for occupational therapy's role in addressing remediation after illness or injury, in addition to congenital, developmental conditions that impact occupational performance and which, if untreated, can have a significant, long-term financial impact on families and society.

As health care reform is implemented and the payment and delivery systems are realigned to focus on patient-centered care, occupational therapy can play a key role in health promotion to a number of populations.

### Role of Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapy practitioners understand the complex and dynamic interactions between people, their environments, and the activities they need to accomplish in their daily lives, and how these interactions affect health and wellness. For example, they can create health-promoting play activities for children to enhance physical well-being and social skills; develop injury prevention programs for adult workers; and educate seniors on home and activity modifications to prevent falls and manage medications. They also recognize the importance of habits and routines that promote the adoption and maintenance of healthy behaviors. This enables the occupational therapy practitioner to facilitate success by matching the person's skills to the demands of the activity, using environmental supports and minimizing barriers, and offering solutions to challenges associated with changing health status, habits, and routines.

For example, an occupational therapist working with a client with diabetes may teach techniques to monitor skin integrity and avoid skin breakdown, assist in establishing a daily meal intake schedule for proper nutrition, address any barriers to meal planning and shopping for healthy food, create strategies for managing food choices at social events, and assist with locating an accessible community exercise program. The intervention is specific to each client's needs, challenges, and strengths.



## How do Occupational Therapists Promote Health and Well-Being?

Occupational therapists:

- Work with people in, or recovery from, cancer treatment to mitigate the side effects on daily functioning
- Perform assessments for health risks, such as the potential for falls, the effect of low vision and/or cognitive issues on safety in daily tasks, and how well the home accommodates current and potential disabilities
- Evaluate children for gross and fine motor, sensory processing, or adaptive behavior deficits that may result in or from developmental delays
- Teach strategies to incorporate healthy habits and routines into daily activities for clients of all ages and abilities
- Identify solutions to personal and environmental barriers (e.g., mental health issues, lack of community mobility), limiting clients from engaging in healthy activities
- Provide skills training in areas such as socialization, caregiving, parenting, time management, stress management, etc.

## Where Do Occupational Therapy Practitioners Provide Health Promotion Services?

Examples of occupation-based health promotion programs developed and run by occupational therapy practitioners include:

- Community-based fall prevention programs for seniors
- Workplace injury prevention and wellness programs
- Ergonomic assessments for computer workstations to decrease repetitive motion and musculoskeletal disorders
- Stress and anger management programs for children in juvenile detention programs
- Parenting classes for teens, parents in homeless shelters, or those recovering from drug dependency
- Backpack safety to prevent injury from heavy loads
- Self-management programs to enable those with chronic diseases like diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, and cardiac conditions to optimize health through appropriate routines (modifications when necessary) and participate in meaningful occupations
- CarFit programs for drivers to accommodate their needs (e.g., limited neck mobility) through minor adaptations and adjustments to the car
- Caregiver education to prevent injury and/or burnout

Occupational therapy practitioners look at all aspects of a person's life and areas of function to support optimal health. By promoting a client-centered approach to performing daily activities (occupations related to self-care, home management, and community participation), and adoption of healthy habits and routines (medication management, safety), occupational therapy practitioners facilitate health across the lifespan.

### Reference

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). Chronic disease prevention and health promotion. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/overview/>

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**Living Life To Its Fullest**<sup>®</sup>  
O C C U P A T I O N A L T H E R A P Y

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.

