

# DYSPHAGIA TALKING POINTS

## INTRODUCTION

This document is intended to provide occupational therapy practitioners with information and resources to support their role in addressing feeding, eating, and swallowing (dysphagia) as an integral part of occupational therapy service delivery. The information may be used with supervisors, administrators, payers, and/or colleagues in other disciplines to support the occupational therapy scope of practice in this area. The resources identified within this document may also be used by occupational therapy practitioners as a guide for ongoing professional development.

Occupational therapy's long-standing expertise in activities of daily living includes the delivery of services that include eating, feeding, and swallowing with individuals across the life span. Both occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants<sup>1</sup> provide essential services in the comprehensive management of feeding, eating, and swallowing problems. These problems can be wide ranging and may include physical difficulty such as bringing food to the mouth, processing it in the mouth, dysphagia, psychosocially based eating disorders, and dysfunction related to cognitive impairments, as well as positioning problems that affect feeding, eating, and swallowing.

## AOTA POSITION

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) has consistently taken the position that evaluation and intervention for dysphagia are solidly within the occupational therapy scope of practice as supported by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE®) educational standards; AOTA's official documents, including the document *Specialized Knowledge and Skills in Feeding, Eating, and Swallowing for Occupational Therapy Practice* (in press) that was recently updated and approved by the 2007 Representative Assembly; and the *Definition of Occupational Therapy Practice for the AOTA Model Practice Act* (2004), as well as AOTA continuing education (CE) offerings.

Occupational therapy practitioners approach feeding and eating as meaningful occupations that are central to the client's full participation and performance. The *AOTA Specialty Certification in Feeding, Eating, and Swallowing* (2006) defines *feeding* as "the process of setting up, arranging, and bringing food [or fluid] from the plate or cup to the mouth; sometimes called self-feeding" (p. 26) and *eating* as "the ability to keep and manipulate food or fluid in the mouth and swallow it" (p. 26).

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<sup>1</sup> Occupational therapists are responsible for all aspects of occupational therapy service delivery and are accountable for the safety and effectiveness of the occupational therapy service delivery process. Occupational therapy assistants deliver occupational therapy services under the supervision of and in partnership with an occupational therapist (AOTA, 2004).

AOTA asserts that an occupational therapist may be the primary provider of dysphagia services. In addition, the Association maintains its long-standing position that occupational therapy practitioners who are adequately prepared may intervene in any or all aspects of the eating/swallowing process, including instrumentation procedures with clients who have a wide range of conditions and eating deficits. Occupational therapists may be part of a dysphagia or swallowing team and may evaluate and treat swallowing as an essential component of the overall eating process.

The *Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics (2005)*, Principle 4, requires that "occupational therapy personnel shall achieve and continually maintain high standards of competence" (p. 640). Accordingly, an increased level of training and professional development is required for more complex and specialized dysphagia-related interventions. In addition to other resources, AOTA recently created the voluntary Feeding, Eating, and Swallowing Specialty Certification to assist practitioners to continually build their capacity for meeting identified competencies related to this area.

## **AOTA RESOURCES TO SUPPORT PRACTICE IN FEEDING, EATING, AND SWALLOWING**

- **ACOTE Accreditation Standards:** Standard B.5.12: "Provide management of feeding and eating to enable performance (including the process of bringing food or fluids from the plate or cup to the mouth, the ability to keep and manipulate food or fluid in the mouth, and the initiation of swallowing) and train others in precautions and techniques while considering client and contextual factors" (p. 29)—<http://www.aota.org/Educate/Accredit/Standards.aspx>
- **Fact Sheet:** *Occupational Therapy: A Vital Role in Dysphagia Care*—<http://www.aota.org/Practitioners/Resources/Docs/FactSheets/Conditions/38514.aspx>
- **Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process:** Feeding and eating are identified as Areas of Occupation within the domain of occupational therapy (AOTA, 2002).  
<http://store.aota.org/aotastore/product.asp?pf%5Fid=1227>
- **Official Document:** *Specialized Knowledge and Skills for Feeding, Eating, and Swallowing in Occupational Therapy Practice* outlines both entry-level and advanced knowledge and skills for OTs and OTAs, as well as guidance for expanding skills in these performance areas (AOTA, in press).
- **Regulatory Support:** *The Definition of Occupational Therapy Practice for the AOTA Model Practice Act*—<http://www.aota.org/Practitioners/Advocacy/State/Resources/PracticeAct/36437.aspx>

Specifically includes management of feeding, eating, and swallowing to enable eating and feeding performance in the scope of occupational therapy practice.

The AOTA State Affairs group works with state associations to lobby appropriate legislation and monitor legislative changes that may affect the OT scope of practice in this area.

- **Self-Paced Clinical Course: *Dysphagia Care for Adults***—  
<http://store.aota.org/aotastore/product.asp?pf%5Fid=3018>
- **Specialty Certification: Feeding, Eating, and Swallowing**—  
<http://www.aota.org/Practitioners/ProfDev/Certification.aspx>  
(complete certification information and application) or  
<http://www.aota.org/Practitioners/ProfDev/Certification/Specialty/38471.aspx>  
(competencies only).

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

Dysphagia—Difficulty with any stage of swallowing (oral, pharyngeal, esophageal); dysfunction in any stage or process of eating; includes any difficulty in the passage of food, liquid, or medicine during any stage of swallowing that impairs the client’s ability to swallow independently or safely (AOTA, in press).

Eating—“...the ability to keep and manipulate food or fluid in the mouth and swallow it; eating and swallowing are often used interchangeably” (AOTA, 2006, p. 26).

Feeding—“...the process of setting up, arranging, and bringing food [or fluid] from the plate or cup to the mouth; sometimes called self-feeding” (AOTA, 2006, p. 26).

Swallowing—A complicated act where food, fluid, medication, or saliva is moved from the mouth through the pharynx and esophagus into the stomach (AOTA, 2006, p. 29).

## REFERENCES

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Occupational Therapy: Skills for the Job of Living

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