



Occupational Therapist Assistant Overview

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The Field

Occupational therapist assistants work under the direction of occupational therapists to provide rehabilitative services to persons with mental, physical, emotional, or developmental impairments. The ultimate goal is to improve clients' quality of life and ability to perform daily activities. For example, occupational therapist assistants help injured workers re-enter the labor force by teaching them how to compensate for lost motor skills or help individuals with learning disabilities increase their independence.

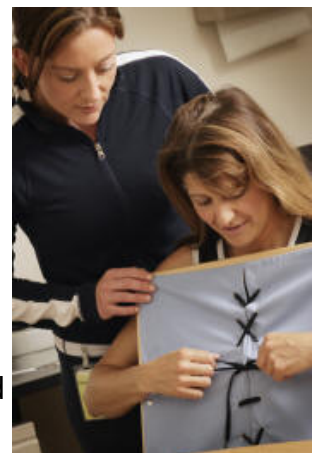


Occupational therapist assistants, commonly known as occupational therapy assistants, help clients with rehabilitative activities and exercises outlined in a treatment plan developed in collaboration with an occupational therapist. Activities range from teaching the proper method of moving from a bed into a wheelchair to the best way to stretch and limber the muscles of the hand. Assistants monitor an individual's activities to make sure that they are performed correctly and to provide encouragement. They also record their client's progress for the occupational therapist. If the treatment is not having the intended effect, or the client is not improving as expected, the therapist may alter the treatment program in hopes of obtaining better results. In addition, occupational therapist assistants document the billing of the client's health insurance provider.

Preparation

An associate degree or a certificate from an accredited community college or technical school is generally required to qualify for occupational therapist assistant jobs. In contrast, occupational therapist aides usually receive most of their training on the job.

Programs are accredited by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education; a full list is available at www.aota.org. The first year of study typically involves an introduction to health care, basic medical terminology, anatomy, and physiology. In the second year, courses are more rigorous and usually include occupational therapist courses in areas such as mental health, adult physical disabilities, gerontology, and pediatrics. Students also must complete 16 weeks of supervised fieldwork in a clinic or community setting.



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Prepared as part of the Sloan Career Cornerstone Center (www.careercornerstone.org)

Note: Some resources in this section are provided by the US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Applicants to occupational therapist assistant programs can improve their chances of admission by taking high school courses in biology and health and by performing volunteer work in nursing care facilities, occupational or physical therapists' offices, or other health care settings.

Occupational therapist aides usually receive most of their training on the job. Qualified applicants must have a high school diploma, strong interpersonal skills, and a desire to help people in need. Applicants may increase their chances of getting a job by volunteering their services, thus displaying initiative and aptitude to the employer.

In most states, occupational therapist assistants are regulated and must pass a national certification examination after they graduate. Those who pass the test are awarded the title "Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant."

Assistants and aides must be responsible, patient, and willing to take directions and work as part of a team. Furthermore, they should be caring and want to help people who are not able to help themselves.

Day in the Life

Occupational therapist assistants need to have a moderate degree of strength because of the physical exertion required to assist patients. For example, assistants may need to lift patients. Constant kneeling, stooping, and standing for long periods also are part of the job.

The hours and days that occupational therapist assistants work vary by facility and with whether they are full- or part time. For example, many outpatient therapy offices and clinics have evening and weekend hours to coincide with patients' schedules.

Occupational therapist assistants may advance into administration positions. They might organize all the assistants in a large occupational therapy department or act as the director for a specific department such as sports medicine. Some assistants go on to teach classes in accredited occupational therapist assistant academic programs or lead health risk reduction classes for the elderly.



Earnings

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median annual earnings of occupational therapist assistants are about \$42,060. The middle 50 percent earn between \$34,130 and \$50,230. The lowest 10 percent earn less than \$26,050, and the highest 10 percent earn more than \$58,270. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of occupational therapist assistants are:

Offices of physical, occupational and speech therapists, and audiologists	\$45,130
Nursing care facilities	\$43,280
General medical and surgical hospitals	\$40,060

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Employment

Occupational therapist assistants hold about 25,000 jobs in the United States. About 29 percent of jobs for assistants are in hospitals, 23 percent are in offices of occupational therapists, and 21 percent are in nursing and residential care facilities. The rest are primarily in community care facilities for the elderly, home health care services, individual and family services, and state government agencies.

Career Path Forecast

Employment of occupational therapist assistants is expected to grow 25 percent from 2006 to 2016, much faster than the average for all occupations. In the short run, the impact of proposed Federal legislation imposing limits on reimbursement for therapy services may adversely affect the job market for occupational therapist assistants and aides. Over the long run, however, demand for occupational therapist assistants will continue to rise because of the increasing number of individuals with disabilities or limited function.

The growing elderly population is particularly vulnerable to chronic and debilitating conditions that require therapeutic services. These patients often need additional assistance in their treatment, making the roles of assistants and aides vital. Also, the large baby-boom generation is entering the prime age for heart attacks and strokes, further increasing the demand for cardiac and physical rehabilitation. In addition, future medical developments should permit an increased percentage of trauma victims to survive, creating added demand for therapy services. An increase of sensory disorders in children will also spur demand for occupational therapy services.



Occupational therapists are expected to increasingly utilize assistants to reduce the cost of occupational therapy services. Once a patient is evaluated and a treatment plan is designed by the therapist, the occupational therapist assistant can provide many aspects of treatment, as prescribed by the therapist. Opportunities for individuals interested in becoming occupational therapist assistants are expected to be very good. In addition to employment growth, job openings will result from the need to replace occupational therapist assistants and aides who leave the occupation permanently over the 2006-16 period. Occupational therapist assistants with prior experience working in an occupational therapy office or other health care setting will have the best job opportunities.

Professional Organizations

Professional societies provide an excellent means of keeping current and in touch with other professionals in the field. These groups can play a key role in your development and keep you abreast of what is happening in your field. Associations promote the interests of their members and provide a network of contacts that can help you find jobs and move your career forward. They can offer a variety of services including job referral services, continuing education courses, insurance, travel benefits, periodicals, and meeting and conference opportunities. The following is a partial list of professional associations serving Occupational Therapist Assistants.

► **American Occupational Therapy Association (www.aota.org)**

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