



OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSISTANT (OTA)

Occupational Therapy Assistants (OTA's or COTA's) work under the direction of occupational therapists in treating patients with injuries, illnesses, or disabilities through the therapeutic use of everyday activities. They help these patients develop, recover, and improve the skills needed for daily living and working.

Occupational therapy assistants typically do the following:

- Help patients do therapeutic activities, such as specific stretches and other exercises
- Work with children who have development disabilities, leading them in play activities that promote coordination
- Teach patients how to use special equipment; for example, showing a patient with Parkinson's disease how to use devices that make eating easier
- Record patients' progress, report to occupational therapists, and do other administrative tasks

Occupational therapy assistants collaborate with occupational therapists to develop a treatment plan for each patient. Then the occupational therapy assistant carries out the plan with the patient. Activities in the plans range from teaching the proper way to move from a bed into a wheelchair to the best way to stretch and limber one's muscles. For example, an occupational therapy assistant might work with injured workers to help them get back into the work force by teaching them how to work around lost motor skills. An occupational therapy assistant might work with people with learning disabilities to teach them skills that let them be more independent. Assistants monitor activities to make sure patients are doing them correctly. They also encourage the patients. They record the patient's progress so the therapist can change the treatment plan if the patient is not getting the desired results.

IMPORTANT QUALITIES

- **Compassion.** Occupational therapy assistants frequently work with patients who struggle with many of life's basic activities. As a result, they should be compassionate and caring and have the ability to encourage others.
- **Detail oriented.** Occupational therapy assistants must be able to quickly and accurately follow the instructions, both written and spoken, of an occupational therapist.
- **Interpersonal skills.** Occupational therapy assistants spend much of their time interacting with patients. They should be friendly and courteous, and they should be able to communicate with patients to the extent of their ability and training.
- **Physical strength.** Occupational therapy assistants need to have a moderate degree of strength because of the physical exertion required to assist patients. Constant kneeling, stooping, and standing for long periods also are part of the job.

EDUCATION/LICENSURE

Occupational therapy assistants typically earn an **associate degree** from an accredited program. These programs generally require two years of full-time study. This includes classroom instruction in subjects such as psychology, biology, and pediatric health. Occupational therapy assistants also complete clinical fieldwork as part of their education to gain hands-on work experience.

To be licensed, occupational therapy assistants must graduate from an accredited program. In March 2013, there were 162 occupational therapy assistant programs accredited by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE), a branch of the American Occupational Therapy Association. Occupational therapy assistants who have completed an accredited program can become certified by passing an exam offered by the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy. Certification is *voluntary* and

allows assistants to use the title “**Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant**” (COTA). Some occupational therapy assistants advance by obtaining additional education to become occupational therapists. A small number of occupational therapist “bridge” programs are designed for qualifying occupational therapy assistants to advance to therapists.

Related Schools

- Jefferson College of Health Sciences
- Northern Virginia Community College
- Tidewater Community College
- Southwest Virginia Community College
- Virginia Highlands Community College
- Wytheville Community College

AVERAGE SALARY

The median annual wage of occupational therapy assistants was \$53, 240 in May 2012. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than that amount and half earned less. The lowest 10% earned less than \$32,970 and the top 10% earned more than \$73,120.

JOB OUTLOOK

Demand for occupational therapy is expected to rise significantly over the coming decade in response to the health needs of the aging baby-boom generation and a growing elderly population. Older adults are especially prone to conditions such as arthritis that affect their everyday activities. Occupational therapy will also continue to be used for treating children and young adults with developmental disabilities like autism.

Employment of physical therapist assistants and aides is expected to **increase 43 percent** from 2012 to 2022, much faster than the average for all occupations. Demand for occupational therapy assistants is also expected to come from occupational therapists employing more assistants to reduce the cost of occupational therapy services. After the therapist has evaluated a patient and designed a treatment plan, the occupational therapy assistant can provide many aspects of the treatment that the therapist prescribed.

WORKING CONDITIONS

The hours and days that occupational therapy assistants work vary with the facility and with whether they are full- or part-time employees. Many outpatient therapy offices and clinics have evening and weekend hours, to help coincide with patients’ personal schedules. Employment opportunities are available in home health, long-term care facilities, specialty and general hospitals, outpatient clinics, private offices, and elementary, middle, and secondary schools.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

American Occupational Therapy Association

4720 Montgomery Avenue
P.O. Box 31220
Bethesda, MD 20824-1220
(301) 652-2682
<http://www.aota.org>

Virginia Occupational Therapy Association

1111 N. Fairfax St.
Alexandria, VA 22314
(800) 999-2782 ext. 3235, ext. 3235
<http://www.vpta.org>

Related Websites: <http://www.bls.gov> <http://www.vaview.vt.edu> <http://www.ahec.vcu.edu>