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# Occupational Therapist Assistants and Aides

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## Significant Points

- Occupational therapist assistants generally must complete an associate degree or a certificate program; in contrast, occupational therapist aides usually receive most of their training on the job.
- Employment is projected to grow much faster than the average as demand for occupational therapy services rises and as occupational therapists increasingly use assistants and aides.
- Job prospects should be very good for occupational therapist assistants; job seekers holding only a high school diploma might face keen competition for occupational therapist aide jobs.

## Nature of the Work

Occupational therapist assistants and aides 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.

*Occupational therapist aides* typically prepare materials and assemble equipment used during treatment. They are responsible for a range of clerical tasks, including scheduling appointments, answering the telephone, restocking or ordering depleted supplies, and filling out insurance forms or other paperwork. Aides are not licensed, so the law does not allow them to perform as wide a range of tasks as occupational therapist assistants.

**Work environment.** Occupational therapist assistants and aides need to have a moderate degree of strength because of the physical exertion required to assist patients. For example, assistants and aides may need to lift patients. Constant kneel-

ing, stooping, and standing for long periods also are part of the job.

The hours and days that occupational therapist assistants and aides 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.

## Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

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.

**Education and training.** There were 126 accredited occupational therapist assistant programs in 2007. 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.

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 assistants and aides provide rehabilitative services to persons with mental, physical, emotional, or developmental impairments.*

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.

**Licensure.** 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.”

**Other qualifications.** 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.

**Advancement.** 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.

## Employment

Occupational therapist assistants and aides held about 33,000 jobs in 2006. Occupational therapist assistants held about 25,000 jobs, and occupational therapist aides held approximately 8,200. About 29 percent of jobs for assistants and aides were in hospitals, 23 percent were in offices of occupational therapists, and 21 percent were in nursing and residential care facilities. The rest were primarily in community care facilities for the elderly, home health care services, individual and family services, and State government agencies.

## Job Outlook

Employment is expected to grow much faster than average as demand for occupational therapy services rises and as occupational therapists increasingly use assistants and aides. Job prospects should be very good for occupational therapist assistants. Job seekers holding only a high school diploma might face keen competition for occupational therapist aide jobs.

**Employment change.** Employment of occupational therapist assistants and aides 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 and aides 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 and aides 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.

**Job prospects.** 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 and aides with prior experience working in an occupational therapy office or other health care setting will have the best job opportunities. However, individuals with only a high school diploma may face keen competition for occupational therapist aide jobs.

## Earnings

Median annual earnings of occupational therapist assistants were \$42,060 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$34,130 and \$50,230. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$26,050, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$58,270. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of occupational therapist assistants in May 2006 were:

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

Median annual earnings of occupational therapist aides were \$25,020 in May 2006. The middle 50 percent earned between \$20,460 and \$32,160. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$17,060, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$44,130.

## Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-16	
				Number	Percent
Occupational therapist assistants and aides .....	31-2010	33,000	41,000	8,200	25
Occupational therapist assistants .....	31-2011	25,000	31,000	6,400	25
Occupational therapist aides .....	31-2012	8,200	10,000	1,800	22

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of occupational therapist aides in May 2006 were:

Offices of physical, occupational and speech therapists, and audiologists .....	\$26,960
General medical and surgical hospitals.....	26,360
Nursing care facilities .....	25,520

**Related Occupations**

Occupational therapist assistants and aides work under the supervision and direction of occupational therapists. Other workers in the health care field who work under similar supervision

include dental assistants; medical assistants; nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides; personal and home care aides; pharmacy aides; pharmacy technicians; and physical therapist assistants and aides.

**Sources of Additional Information**

For information on a career as an occupational therapist assistant or aide, and a list of accredited programs, contact:

► American Occupational Therapy Association, 4720 Montgomery Lane., Bethesda, MD 20824-1220.

Internet: <http://www.aota.org>