Chronic diseases affect an ever-increasing number of Americans.

The Centers for Disease Control (2008) estimated that 25 million or 1 in 10 Americans experience limitations in daily living activities and participation in the community due to a chronic disease. Individuals with chronic conditions face multiple challenges such as managing one's disease, daily activities, and difficult emotions (Lorig, et al., 2006). Occupational therapy can successfully address these challenges and is an important resource for managing chronic disease.

How Does Occupational Therapy Benefit Persons With Chronic Diseases?

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are health professionals who are skilled in prevention, lifestyle modification, and physical and psychosocial rehabilitation for persons living with chronic conditions. Occupational therapy focuses on enabling individuals to participate in productive and meaningful activities of daily life. Practitioners achieve this outcome through active collaboration with clients and their significant others during the evaluation and intervention process (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2008). By considering a client’s abilities, the features of the environment, and the specific demands of the activities that are important to the client, occupational therapy practitioners support their clients to live life to its fullest.
Occupational Therapy Supports Chronic Disease Management in a Variety of Ways

Depending on the nature and course of the specific condition(s), the occupational therapy goals for clients with chronic health conditions may include but are not limited to the following:

- Addressing problems or symptoms associated with specific chronic conditions to sustain current abilities
- Developing strategies to incorporate energy conservation and activity modification techniques into daily activities to cope with physical demands and reduce fatigue associated with many chronic conditions
- Individualizing adaptations to effectively perform health management tasks
- Learning and incorporating health management tasks into existing habits so they become part of one’s routine
- Teaching and demonstrating techniques to relieve stress, cope with and manage pain, fatigue, or difficult symptoms associated with the disease
- Adapting tasks or environments to fit changing abilities and enable activities to continue
- Developing coping strategies, behaviors, habits, routines, and lifestyle adaptations to support physical and psychosocial health and well-being.

Occupational Therapy and Self-Management

Self-management is recognized as an effective approach to the management of chronic health conditions. Self-management is “the individual’s ability to manage the symptoms, treatment, physical and psychosocial consequences and lifestyle changes inherent in living with a chronic condition. Efficacious self-management encompasses ability to monitor one’s condition and to effect the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses necessary to maintain a satisfactory quality of life” (Barlow, Wright, Sheasby, Turner, & Hainsworth, 2002, p. 178).

Individuals with chronic diseases work in collaboration with their health care providers, whose role is to provide self-management support (Glasgow, Davis, Funnell, & Beck, 2003). The client-centered nature of occupational therapy is ideal to support self-management. Whether a client is newly diagnosed or has experienced a chronic disease for many years, occupational therapy supports the challenge of managing the disease while also managing daily life. Sustaining abilities, maintaining health and well-being, and achieving optimal function is a collaborative process between practitioner and client. Self-management is about being in charge of one’s life and managing one’s condition instead of being managed by that condition.
Managing Daily Activities and Responsibilities

Living with chronic diseases may bring about changing physical abilities. Occupational therapy practitioners analyze the demands of activities that are meaningful to the client and assess the fit between abilities and challenges imposed by those activities and the environment. They may make recommendations on how to conserve energy, reduce or prevent pain, simplify one’s activities and improve the safety and ease of working in a given environment (e.g., home, school, work).

Integrating Health Management Into Existing Routines

Management of chronic diseases involves learning specific health management tasks. Such tasks may include regular monitoring of blood pressure or weight; preparing meals according to specific requirements or restrictions; monitoring blood glucose; administering oral, injected, or inhaled medications; or increasing physical activity. It is not enough to learn and demonstrate these tasks. To be effective, these tasks must be consistently and habitually performed; they must be integrated into existing routines. Occupational therapy practitioners assist clients with integrating health management tasks into daily routines and, if necessary, incorporate adaptations to simplify the demands of these tasks. Occupational therapy practitioners are particularly skilled in lifestyle management that fits with existing routines and patterns so changes feel less disruptive and are more likely to be successfully integrated into daily routines.

Changing Thinking and Behaviors Related to Health Maintenance

Occupational therapy practitioners understand the emotional challenges associated with living with a chronic condition, such as anger and depression, feelings of uncertainty about the future, and changes in relationships with family and friends. They recognize that well-being is more than controlling symptoms or managing daily tasks and focus on what is meaningful to the client. Occupational therapy practitioners engage clients and their significant others to take charge of their own care and to sustain the responsibilities and relationships important to the client, thereby controlling the effects and progression of their condition.

Occupational therapy services enable individuals with chronic health conditions to continue to engage in meaningful activities, assume valued life roles, and participate as productive members of society. Occupational therapy is about “Living Life To Its Fullest!”
References and Resources


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*Living Life To Its Fullest™  
**Occupational Therapy**

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.