

From the Seat to Your Feet

How Occupational Therapy May Help You



Everyone knows exercise helps to reduce health risks and keeps a person mentally sharp, but what happens when age or physical challenges make it difficult to move? After all, it's very important to be active throughout your entire life—especially during your senior years. If you aren't being as active as you would like to be, it may be time to talk to an occupational therapist (OT).

I'm often asked to explain the difference between occupational therapy and physical therapy. There are many overlapping similarities between the two fields, but the main difference is that occupational therapy is focused on addressing physical, social or psychological factors that contribute to a person's ability to function in everyday activities. Physical therapy, on the other hand, often targets the physical source of a particular injury or health concern. The overall goal of occupational therapy treatment instead is to help people continue to function in everyday life.

Occupational therapists can help you be more active by working with you to address obstacles in the environment—or even within yourself. OTs are trained to help clients with their mobility as well as recommend physical activities to suit the needs of each person. In order to get the most out of your time with an OT, here are some answers to key questions you may ask.

Q How can I cope with feelings of fatigue?

It is challenging to be more active when you simply do not feel you have the energy to do so. OTs often recommend ways to conserve energy and improve the quality of your sleep. Energy conservation strategies are designed to save energy in day-to-day tasks—such as housekeeping, food preparation and morning routines—in order to have energy to spend on other activities like exercise.

A good example of an energy conservation strategy is sitting to fold laundry or to prepare meals in order to be ready for another activity later. This is not being lazy; it's being strategic. Plan your exercise at a time of day when you are the least fatigued. And be sure to get a good night's rest, which includes creating a sleep space that has gentle lighting and temperature control, and is free from stress and distractions.

Q What can I do when I have chronic pain?

The most important thing to remember is that the old saying “no pain, no gain” is out of fashion. In fact, with an appropriately paced exercise plan that includes taking breaks, paying attention to your body's limitations and making adjustments for your strengths, your pain should not get worse and may even reduce in intensity.

If you require medication to help manage your pain, talk with your pharmacist about how to time taking the medication in order to coordinate it with your plan to exercise. Select activities that do not put additional stress on joints or are associated with high-impact aerobics, like jumping or running on hard surfaces.

If weight training is part of your plan, talk

with a personal trainer about using your own body weight as a means of resistance. If you like to use weight machines, be sure to talk with a trainer to learn how to set the machine for your body size, shape and capacity.

Including relaxation exercises into your daily routine is an effective coping strategy for those living with chronic pain. These include meditation, visual imagery and gentle, progressive muscle relaxation. Don't be shy about asking for help to cope with pain. Unless you say something, the healthcare professionals and personal trainers working with you may not realize that you're hurting.

Q I use a wheelchair/walker/cane to help me get around. Is there a way I can be more active?

Finding a place to participate in physical activities may be a challenge for you, but an OT will know where you can go to participate in sports or other physical activities that have been adapted to meet your individual needs. Wheelchair sports include basketball, track racing, tennis and many others. If sports are not for you, traditional exercise classes can be modified for sitting in a chair or for the pool.

Places that offer adapted physical-activity programming often have changing rooms that

are accessible for wheeled devices, including seating to easily transfer to showers that have seats or benches and pools with sloping surfaces for better entry and exit. When embarking on a more active schedule, keep your focus on having fun, being social and enjoying the overall health benefits that help you live life to the fullest. ■



To learn more about occupational therapy, check out the American Occupational Therapy Association Inc. at www.aota.org or the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists at www.caot.ca.

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