

# The Role of Occupational Therapy: Providing Care in a Pandemic

<http://www.aota.org/Advocacy-Policy/Federal-Reg-Affairs/News/2020/OT-Pandemic.aspx>

This is an unprecedented time in health care that is evolving every day. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, many organizations and occupational therapy practitioners are struggling with the question, “what is the appropriate role of occupational therapy during a pandemic?” Guidance from federal agencies is continually shared as the status of the pandemic within the United States is evolving on a daily basis. AOTA urges occupational therapy practitioners to continue to check guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) for the most up-to-date information.

On March 19, the [Department of Homeland Security released a Memorandum](#) to further respond to a March 16 statement from President Trump stating that:

*“If you work in a critical infrastructure industry, as defined by the Department of Homeland Security, such as healthcare services and pharmaceutical and food supply, you have a special responsibility to maintain your normal work schedule.”*

The Memorandum identifies workers who conduct a range of operations and services that are essential to continued national critical infrastructure viability. The list includes occupational therapists as critical workers within health care in the following category:

*Caregivers (e.g., physicians, dentists, psychologists, mid-level practitioners, nurses and assistants, infection control and quality assurance personnel, pharmacists, physical and occupational therapists and assistants, social workers, speech pathologists and diagnostic and therapeutic technicians and technologists).*

At the same time, the [CDC now recommends](#) that “Healthcare facilities and clinicians should prioritize urgent and emergency visits and procedures now and for the coming several weeks.” This includes delaying all elective ambulatory visits. The CDC recommendations are regularly updated to reflect the best available information and the environment.

This is an extremely difficult time, but it does not minimize the value of occupational therapy. Clients and practitioners should be aware of the risks associated with both providing care and delaying care in order to make an informed decision regarding next steps. This is where your clinical judgement and leadership skills in navigating your unique setting to engage in decision making with your care teams is of vital importance to the health of the community and country at large.

AOTA considers occupational therapy services as essential because they are a key part of client care plans and may often be the reason a client is receiving care in a certain setting. Delays in rehabilitation have been associated with worsening symptoms and adverse events for children, adolescents, and adults.

Consider the role of occupational therapy in:

- Reducing the likelihood of hospitalization or readmission;
- Decreasing the likelihood of contractures and joint deformities;
- Improving resistance to infection via movement and activities proven to enhance immunity;
- Combatting disruptions to mood as a result of social isolation;

- Addressing clients' occupational deprivation and establishing habits, roles, and routines;
- Promoting participation in education, play, and learning in the home or school; and
- Increasing independence in occupations, thereby reducing the need for caregivers to be in close proximity to clients.

Access to personal protective equipment (PPE) may be limited during this emergency, but it is an important part of following [CDC Recommendations](#) for infection control. AOTA is advocating for immediate solutions to the shortage of PPE. While the CDC guidance on extending the life of PPE is necessary during this crisis, it is not sufficient. For example, at this time, many clients want to stay in their home or return home to minimize their risk of exposure to COVID-19. Occupational therapy practitioners have a critical role in treating patients in [home health](#) and are also competent in infection control procedures across settings. Occupational therapy practitioners also need access to PPE for the safety of their clients and themselves to avoid further spread of the virus.

Regardless of the setting, there may be long-term negative physical, cognitive, and psychosocial effects for clients who do not receive the therapy they need. But in this unprecedented time, there are many factors that will affect care delivery, such as population, geographic location, staff availability (due to possible exposure requiring self-isolation), etc. Some therapy may need to be suspended or modified based on the client. Therapy practitioners may be advised not go to multiple buildings in one day. In addition, therapy practitioners in some facilities may be asked to provide additional public health support activities in order to meet other clients' basic needs such as taking vitals or completing screening questions.

Each individual facility must determine who is an essential health care worker in accordance with their own policies and procedures. In addition, they must comply with the CDC, their state governor, and state health departments. Additional [CDC Guidance](#) includes this Q&A:

**Q:** Should any diagnostic or therapeutic interventions be withheld due to concerns about transmission of COVID-19?

**A:** Patients should receive any interventions they would normally receive as standard of care. Patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 should be asked to wear a surgical mask as soon as they are identified and be evaluated in a private room with the door closed. Healthcare personnel entering the room should use [Standard and Transmission-based Precautions](#). If there are interruptions to service that delay continued access to care, CMS provides the following guidance to assist providers:

- Review clients' plan of care and consider making any updates or modifications that may be necessary to account for client access issues related to COVID-19;
- Communicate with clients and their families/caregivers as appropriate to help them understand the situation and assure them that you are doing all that you can to provide (or resume) services; and
- Ensure that all members of the care team are documenting in the medical record their efforts to adhere to the client's plan of care, including all refused attempts to see clients in person and all alternative methods used to perform client visits (e.g., phone calls and virtual visits).

Occupational therapy practitioners work in a variety of settings and treat populations that each present unique challenges. Practitioners should consider the AOTA [Code of Ethics](#) as they collaborate with

clients to determine the best way to meet occupational therapy needs in a way that is as safe as possible for both clients and practitioners.

While telehealth seems like a practical option, the current reality is that each state determines whether telehealth is allowed. Therapy practitioners must follow their state and local laws, regulations, and policies. AOTA is tirelessly advocating for coverage of telehealth services provided by therapy practitioners at the state and [federal levels](#). State telehealth policies are evolving every day as a safe option to provide patient care. Please check our [website](#) for updates.

We are working hard to provide accurate guidance to our members, and we encourage occupational therapy practitioners to make every reasonable effort to meet client needs and avoid interruptions and delays in care while keeping clients and themselves safe and healthy. Please continue to watch our website for updates.

### **Additional Resources**

[Memorandum on Identification of Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers during COVID-19 response](#).

U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, Office of the Director (March 19, 2020).

American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) [Occupational Therapy Code of Ethics \(2015\)](#).

American Health Care Association (AHCA) guidance [The Role of Physical and Occupational Therapy and Speech-Language Pathology Personnel in LTC Facilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

[AHCA Coronavirus Resources](#)

[National Association for Home Care & Hospice \(NAHC\) Coronavirus Resources](#)

[Occupational Therapy's Role in Home Health \(AOTA Fact Sheet\)](#)

[Skilled Nursing News article](#)

[DC Information on COVID-19 for Pregnant Women and Children](#)

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