

Helping People Live Better with the Diagnosis of a Brain Tumor: Occupational Therapy

Introduction

A brain tumor or its treatment may cause changes in the way you think, act, feel, see, or move your body. Taking care of your basic daily needs such as taking a shower, toileting, eating, or getting dressed might present challenges. In this two part series, we talk about how to take charge of directing your own physical care. We'll teach you and your loved ones how to access the assistance available through two areas of rehabilitative medicine: occupational therapy and physical therapy.

This article focuses on occupational therapy. Please also see the second part of this series, focused on physical therapy.
--

Occupational therapy is a skilled treatment that helps individuals achieve independence in their lives. A person trained in occupational therapy is called an “occupational therapist.” These therapists understand the desire, and importance, of being able to perform activities as independently as possible. They can help you improve your skills, perform activities in a different way, or identify assistive equipment that will help make these tasks easier to accomplish. Occupational therapists view life holistically. They focus on the whole person – the physical, social, emotional, and psychological effects of illness and injury. They understand that an activity’s importance can be different from individual to individual. They focus on your priorities. Occupational therapists are creative problem solvers dedicated to helping you and your loved ones learn how to perform the activities that are important to you in a safe and independent manner.

What can occupational therapists offer people with brain tumors?

An occupational therapist can help you identify skills affected by your brain tumor, and determine ways to help you accomplish your tasks. Depending on your condition, you may be able to improve your functioning by performing specific exercises and activities. Or, if some of your problems are permanent or severe, you may be able to learn compensation techniques and

how to use assistive devices. These techniques may include re-learning how to do your favorite activities or learning to do them in a different way. If you need help from others to complete tasks, your occupational therapist will teach you how to best instruct others, and teach your caregivers how to provide the assistance you need.

Occupational therapists may also perform a home safety evaluation to make suggestions for home accessibility, including recommending appropriate bathroom equipment or home modifications. They may recommend adaptive devices and durable medical equipment to increase your safety and independence with activities. In some cases, insurance may cover the cost of these adaptive equipment supplies. (Always check with your occupational therapist or insurance company before you make a purchase. Some products may require a prescription or documentation) The websites at North Coast Functional Solutions (www.beabletodo.com) and Sammons Preston Rolyan-USA (www.sammonspreston.com) offer a comprehensive selection of products for all areas of activities of daily living.

How can I learn if occupational therapy can help me?

Ask your doctor to write a referral or prescription for an occupational therapy evaluation and treatment. The hospital at which you are being treated for your brain tumor may have a rehabilitative medicine program that includes occupational therapy services. Or, you might look for a brain injury rehabilitation program; these programs view brain surgery as a brain injury. The NeuroTrauma Registry (www.neure.com) offers a comprehensive online listing of brain injury rehabilitation service providers. The American Occupational Therapy Association (www.aota.org) provides a listing of state occupational therapy associations which can help locate professionals.

Who can provide occupational therapy services?

Occupational therapists are professionals who have earned a bachelors, masters, or doctoral degree. They must successfully complete clinical internships and pass a stringent national examination. After graduation, occupational therapists participate in continuing education and can earn Board Certification or Specialty Certification for specific competencies.

What is an evaluation process like?

An occupational therapist trained in brain injury should do your initial evaluation. That evaluation will determine your baseline skill level, strengths, limitations, and degree of functional independence. Tell the evaluator about any difficulties you are experiencing or safety concerns. Share your personal goals, expectations, and priorities with the evaluator. S/he will then develop a treatment plan with specific short term and long term goals for your performance and independence.

There are different types of evaluations. Standardized tests may be used to evaluate muscle movements, hand coordination, strength, memory skills, and visual perception. For subjective tests, the occupational therapist will ask you to perform or simulate certain activities, such as dressing, feeding, bathing, and toileting. Although these tasks are very private and personal, they are essential for independent daily living. Occupational therapists are professionals and respect your dignity. Their purpose is to make recommendations to improve your skills, safety, and independence.

What part of my insurance policy should I check to see if services are covered?

Read your health insurance policy to see what type of rehabilitation therapies are covered. Then, call your insurance provider for clarification of your benefits. If you need to stay within a “network” of providers, your insurance provider can help you find a list of these specially contracted providers. You can also ask the rehab program professionals for assistance. If the program you choose is not in your insurance network, the program may be willing to contract with your insurance company at a negotiated “test case” rate. If the program cannot work with your insurer, ask for the names of other brain injury programs in your area.

What resources are there if my insurance does not cover such services?

Ask your insurer if they will cover an evaluation for a home-based occupational therapy program. This may include evaluation and training in a focused, specific area. For example, if you are interested in improving your meal preparation skills, an occupational therapist could suggest adaptive kitchen utensils and simple compensation techniques for you to learn at home.

This type of evaluation will limit your personal expenditure on weekly therapy visits while providing you with professional suggestions and guidelines.

The second part of this series focuses on the benefits offered to brain tumor patients through physical therapy. Visit our web site at www.abta.org, or call us at 800-886-2282 for a copy of that article.

This article was written by Mary Car-Blanchard, OTD, OTR/L. Dr. Car-Blanchard has a Clinical Doctorate Degree and a Bachelor's Degree in occupational therapy. She has spent over 17 years in the medical trauma field, with a focus on individuals with brain injuries.