

Occupational therapy strategies for people living with HIV/AIDS

If you or someone you care about is living with HIV or AIDS and finds it difficult to do daily activities or participate in the community, occupational therapy may be able to help. Occupational therapy can provide strategies to help manage living with HIV/AIDS.

Strategies to help with physical challenges

HIV can affect the entire body and may involve the muscles, bones, nerves, stomach and/or heart. About one-third of people with HIV develop problems with their feet, which can include numbness, burning pain and muscle weakness. The person with HIV/AIDS may also experience pain in other parts of their body. Other physical challenges may include fatigue, problems moving around and managing daily activities such as bathing, preparing meals or doing errands in the community. These are some occupational therapy strategies to help with these physical challenges:

- Save energy by planning your activities, as well as modifying your home or work environment. This will help you do the activities that you value.
- Be comfortable by choosing the right chair.
- Get around easier by using a cane, walker, wheelchair or scooter.
- Consider trying adaptive devices and resources to make it simpler to dress, bath, go to the bathroom, shop and cook.
- Find out about different types of transportation if you have problems walking.
- If your feet hurt, try to have good foot care, footwear, protective insoles, and in some cases custom-made foot orthotics to help with the pain.
- To manage pain, try using relaxation techniques, pacing and planning your activities.
- Be more aware of your safety by noticing your foot position on stairs and the temperature of the water when bathing.

Strategies to help with changes in your thinking and mental health

Many people experience changes to their brain which can affect their thinking and their emotional state. People with HIV/AIDS may find their judgment, attention, motivation and ability to deal with emotional situations have changed. They may also experience some form of depression or difficulty coping with the life changes resulting from the illness.

These are some occupational therapy strategies to help with these changes:

- To help remember activities, try using verbal or written cues or memory aids such as a journal or calendar.
- Develop a routine and structure to your time, for example on a regular basis try to meet with someone for support.
- Develop healthy coping strategies to assist with life situations.



Fast facts about occupational therapy

- Occupational therapists help people to engage in daily activities and participate in any other activities they find meaningful.
- Occupational therapists are regulated health care professionals with post-secondary education.
- As more people live longer with HIV/AIDS, they will require more rehabilitation services including occupational therapy.

Strategies to help with returning to work

As life expectancy increases for people living with HIV/AIDS, they may want support to begin working or return to work. But for many people living with this disease, there are significant employment problems based on stigma, discrimination and risk of continued medical and financial support should they need to leave work. Other barriers with returning to work include significant gaps in time from previous employment, loss of previous job title, changes to job demands and technological advances. These are some occupational therapy strategies to help with these changes:

- Gradually increase the ability to cope with the physical, cognitive and social demands of the job. This may be achieved by vocational rehabilitation.
- An occupational therapist can help with this process by keeping in touch with employers, advocating, explaining ergonomic issues and job matching.

Fast facts about HIV/AIDS

- Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) targets the body's immune system. People can live many years without any symptoms, but over time their immune system becomes weak and their body is not able to fight off illnesses or infections.
- Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) describes a collection of symptoms and infections caused by the HIV. An individual with AIDS lives with a chronic, life-threatening condition.
- More than 56,000 people in Canada are living with HIV and include men, women and children from all regions of Canada.
- Some people in Canada have been living with HIV for more than 20 years.

Strategies to help with housing concerns

Many people living with HIV/AIDS have a need for affordable, supportive and accessible housing options. Currently the few Canadian facilities in large urban settings are filled to capacity and waiting lists are extensive.



These are some occupational therapy strategies to help with housing concerns:

- Home adaptations and/or renovations can assist with making housing accessible, easy and safe for moving around, as well as supporting independence in home activities.
- Occupational therapists can assist clients and families to explore the best housing options and assist with successful transitions.

HIV/AIDS has now become a chronic disease. People living with HIV may have periods where they are feeling healthy, but also times where their health is poor. Occupational therapists have the expertise to work with people who have these types of episodic problems. The chronic nature of HIV and AIDS will likely mean that occupational therapists will be more involved with this population.

If you are experiencing some of the difficulties discussed above, please contact an occupational therapist, your health care team and/or physician about rehabilitation and how to access an occupational therapist.

Visit www.otworks.ca and click on OT Finder to locate an occupational therapist closest to you. For more information on occupational therapy and HIV/AIDS visit the website for the Canadian Working Group on HIV and Rehabilitation: www.hivandrehab.ca. The Canadian AIDS Society, CATIE (Community AIDS Treatment Information) and local AIDS organizations can provide access to resources, advice and support.



CAOT wishes to acknowledge the work of Debra Cameron, Todd Tran, Gillian Bone and Sheila Thomas for assisting with this consumer tip sheet.