Alberta Health Services

Helping Adults with Obesity (BMI ≥ 30 kg/m²) who have Functional Concerns: Tips on Referring to Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapists promote health and well being for people with obesity by facilitating engagement in occupations of everyday life, including addressing occupational performance issues in the areas of self-care, productivity and leisure. This can impact quality of life, including how people with obesity participate in their daily lives and in health and weight management activities.

Coordinating care with professionals that have overlapping scopes of practice can facilitate optimal care for people with obesity. Depending on the person's need and the complement of professionals available in your clinical setting, occupational therapy may be accessed in a specialty clinic, home care, primary care setting, outpatient services, private practice, or other setting. Please contact programs and services within your zone to access occupational therapy services in your area.*

Occupational therapy referral may be indicated for a person with obesity presenting with any of the challenges listed below. Skills that occupational therapists may employ are listed under each category. Use this guide to determine when you may consider referring a person with obesity to an occupational therapist.

Identify challenges and enable occupational engagement

Engage with clients to determine how their weight impacts:

- occupational performance in self-care, productivity, leisure activities of daily living (ADLs)
- engagement in daily activities from a physical, cognitive, psychosocial, spiritual, and environmental context
- mental health
- engagement in self-management

Collaborate with clients to facilitate:

- improved occupational performance in ADLs through activity-based interventions that address the bio-psychosocial needs of the client
- engagement in self-management activities to support health and weight management
- access to supports and funding in the community and health system

Obesity related co-morbidities that affect ADLs

- Educate clients on self-management of associated conditions (e.g., cardiovascular disease, diabetic neuropathy, dysphagia, osteoarthritis, obstructive sleep apnea, skin conditions, lymphedema**)

**Specialized training required

Education and skill-building

Collaborate with and coach clients to build skills in the areas of:

- meal planning and food preparation
- occupational and life balance
- occupational engagement
- pain management
- physical activity
- skin care management
- sleep hygiene and positioning
- stress management
- time management

Environment

- Identify and address home accessibility barriers
- Identify and address barriers to accessing community resources
- Adapt the task or environment to facilitate occupational engagement (e.g., positioning, assistive devices, space organization)

Mental health

- Apply psychosocial interventions to address the functional impact of mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety disorders, attention-deficit, depressive disorders) on emotions, thoughts, and behaviours
- Support positive body image
- Facilitate social engagement through enhancing social skills or participating in leisure actvities
- Enable clients to optimize time use

Energy management

- Coach clients on how to increase energy expenditure or how to manage limited energy (e.g., self-care, leisure, shopping, working)
- Promote energy management for physical activity (e.g., walking the dog, home exercise program, aquacize class)

Equipment

- Assess for and recommend assistive devices (e.g., self-care aids, mobility aids, abdominal supports)
- Provide education on appropriate footwear or need for orthotics

Consultation and advocacy

- Consult with and coordinate referrals to other health care providers or specialists
- Advocate to support funding and purchase of assistive devices, participation in community programs, access to community resources

* Please contact the site to which you are referring to ensure equipment with the appropriate weight capacity and size is available.