

Occupational therapy in activities of daily living for patients in palliative oncology care: an integrative review

Terapia ocupacional nas atividades de vida diária de pacientes em cuidados paliativos oncológicos: uma revisão integrativa

Terapia ocupacional en las actividades de la vida diaria de pacientes en cuidados paliativos oncológicos: una revisión integradora

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Abstract:

Objective: to identify and analyze the available evidence on Occupational Therapy intervention in the performance of activities of daily living (ADLs) in patients undergoing palliative oncology care. **Methods:** the following databases were considered: Public Medline, Virtual Health Library, and Cochrane, in August 2023, in an atemporal manner. The following descriptors in Portuguese were used: “*Terapia Ocupacional*” (Occupational Therapy), “*Cuidados Paliativos*” (Palliative Care), and “*Atividades de Vida Diária*” (Activities of Daily Living). The data were organized in a table and analyzed based on the frequency of emerging themes and the consistency of findings in different contexts, and discussed according to their relevance to Occupational Therapy practice. **Results:** 114 studies were identified; after applying the eligibility criteria, five were included. The studies demonstrated that Occupational Therapy contributes to maintaining autonomy, emotional well-being, and adaptation to the limitations imposed by the disease and treatment, using strategies such as functional re-education, relaxation, and facilitation of occupational participation. **Conclusion:** building a stronger evidence base is needed at different stages of the disease and in diverse populations, deepening the understanding of the effectiveness of occupational therapy in oncological palliative care.

Keywords: Occupational Therapy; Palliative Care; Activities of Daily Living; Medical Oncology.

Resumo:

Objetivo: identificar e analisar as evidências disponíveis sobre a intervenção da Terapia Ocupacional no desempenho das atividades de vida diária de pacientes em cuidados paliativos oncológicos. **Método:** considerou-se as bases: *Public Medline*, Biblioteca Virtual em Saúde e *Cochrane*, em agosto de 2023, de modo atemporal. Utilizaram-se os descritores em português: “*Terapia Ocupacional*”, “*Cuidados Paliativos*” e “*Atividades de Vida Diária*”. Os dados foram organizados em tabela e analisados com base na frequência dos temas emergentes e na consistência dos achados em diferentes contextos e discutidos de acordo com sua relevância para a prática da Terapia Ocupacional. **Resultados:** Foram identificados 114 estudos; após aplicação dos critérios de elegibilidade, cinco foram incluídos. Os estudos demonstraram que a Terapia Ocupacional contribui para a manutenção da autonomia, para o bem-estar emocional e para a adaptação às limitações impostas pela doença e pelo tratamento, utilizando estratégias como reeducação funcional, relaxamento e facilitação da participação ocupacional. **Conclusão:** a construção de uma base de evidências mais sólida é necessária em diferentes estágios da doença e em populações diversas, aprofundando o entendimento sobre a eficácia da terapia ocupacional nos cuidados paliativos oncológicos.

Palavras-Chave: Terapia Ocupacional; Cuidados Paliativos; Atividades Cotidianas; Oncologia.

Resumen:

Objetivo: identificar y analizar la evidencia disponible sobre la intervención de la terapia ocupacional en el desempeño de las actividades de la vida diaria de pacientes en cuidados paliativos oncológicos. **Método:** se consideraron las bases: *Public Medline*, Biblioteca Virtual en Salud y *Cochrane*, en agosto de 2023, de forma atemporal. Se utilizaron los descriptores en portugués: «*Terapia Ocupacional*», «*Cuidados Paliativos*» y «*Atividades de Vida Diária*» (Actividades de la vida diaria). Los datos se organizaron en una tabla y se analizaron en función de la frecuencia de los temas emergentes y la consistencia de los hallazgos en diferentes contextos, y se discutieron según su relevancia para la práctica de la terapia ocupacional. **Resultados:** Se identificaron 114 estudios; tras aplicar los criterios de elegibilidad, se incluyeron cinco. Los estudios demostraron que la terapia ocupacional contribuye al mantenimiento de la autonomía, al bienestar emocional y a la adaptación a las limitaciones impuestas por la enfermedad y el tratamiento, utilizando estrategias como la reeducación funcional, la relajación y la facilitación de la participación ocupacional. **Conclusión:** es necesario construir una base de evidencia más sólida en diferentes etapas de la enfermedad y en poblaciones diversas, profundizando la comprensión sobre la eficacia de la terapia ocupacional en los cuidados paliativos oncológicos.

Palabras clave: Terapia Ocupacional; Cuidados Paliativos; Actividades Cotidianas; Oncología Médica.

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, one of the main public health challenges in Brazil is the high prevalence of chronic diseases, among which cancer stands out due to its high incidence and significant mortality. Cancer patients frequently experience symptoms that compromise their quality of life, such as pain, fatigue, dyspnea, and functional limitations, making them more vulnerable to complications that require continuous management¹. The progression of cancer implies significant changes in the organization of daily life, with repercussions on autonomy, social participation, and continuity of routines, highlighting the need for approaches that consider the totality of the subject's lived experience².

In this scenario, palliative care constitutes an approach that seeks to promote the quality of life of patients and their families who face problems associated with potentially fatal diseases. This care acts in the prevention and relief of suffering through early identification, adequate assessment, and treatment of pain and other problems, whether physical, psychosocial, or spiritual in nature³. Furthermore, they are directed at the individual as a whole being, broadening the focus beyond the disease, organizing interventions aimed at symptom relief, support, and preservation of dignity⁴.

Palliative care should begin from the moment of diagnosis of a potentially life-threatening illness, extending into the family's grieving phase after the patient's death⁵. Among the principles of palliative care, the promotion of quality of life, relief of suffering, and comprehensive care stand out, involving physical, psychosocial, and spiritual dimensions of the illness experience. This approach emphasizes respect for the values and priorities of the person and their family, recognizing the need for effective communication, shared care planning, and multidisciplinary action throughout the course of the disease, from diagnosis to the grieving phase⁶.

From this perspective, each specialty can contribute to the patient's comprehensive care, with the occupational therapist's role being directed towards comfort and quality of life. This is achieved through the reorganization of occupational life, the reduction of complications, and the development of coping strategies for the illness and hospitalization process, which directly impact the interpersonal relationships of the patient and their family⁷.

Despite its unique benefits, occupational therapy continues to be undervalued and underutilized in palliative care. The limited research on the effectiveness of Occupational Therapy in the hospital setting represents a significant limitation for raising awareness of occupational needs, for the integration of occupation-based interventions, and even for the allocation of financial resources to services in this area⁸.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of Occupational Therapy in palliative care, there is an opportunity to deepen knowledge about the effectiveness of these specific interventions, especially when compared to other specialties⁷. This scenario is particularly relevant in the context of interventions related to the performance of Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) in patients with oncological palliative care.

Therefore, it becomes essential to establish eligibility criteria, variables, and parameters, as well as define search terms for a more precise analysis aligned with the needs of this population. A thorough understanding of the impact of these interventions is crucial to improve the care provided to this vulnerable population and optimize the multidisciplinary approach in oncological palliative care.

Thus, this study aims to identify and analyze the available evidence on the intervention of Occupational Therapy in the performance of activities of daily living in patients in oncological palliative care.

METHODS

This is an integrative review that went through six phases, which include the formulation of the guiding question, the search and selection of primary studies, data collection, detailed evaluation of the studies, compilation of results, and the final presentation of the review⁹.

The search and selection of primary studies took place in August 2023 and was carried out by only one reviewer in the following databases and digital library: Public Medline (PubMed); Virtual Health Library (VHL); and Cochrane. The search in the databases was carried out using the key “((Palliative Care) AND (Activities of Daily Living)) AND (Occupational Therapy)”, constructed based on the Health Sciences Descriptors (DeCS) and combined by the Boolean operator “AND”, considering the Portuguese and English languages.

After carrying out the initial search and selection in the databases, duplicates were excluded, and then the titles and abstracts of the articles found were read, and subsequently, the studies were read in full. To qualify this stage of the review, the Guideline Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)¹⁰ was used.

Original research studies available in English and Portuguese were included, without restriction of full access, aiming to offer a synthesis of the knowledge published up to that point.

The analysis of the selected studies focused on Occupational Therapy interventions in ADLs in cancer patients in Palliative Care, addressing the impact of these interventions on the

functions and quality of life of patients, when mentioned in the study results. Editorials, reviews, book chapters, dissertations, theses, and experience reports were excluded.

The initial screening was carried out based on reading the titles and abstracts of the articles. Potentially relevant studies were then evaluated in full to confirm their eligibility.

The methodological quality assessment of the included studies was carried out using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI)¹¹ checklists, applied according to the design of each study. This step allowed us to verify the methodological rigor and applicability of the findings.

The extracted data were organized into a synthesis matrix in Microsoft Excel software and systematized in a synoptic table to facilitate comparison. This table included the following information: year and first author, title, objective, country, methodological design, sample, and main results. Organizing the data into these elements allowed for a comprehensive and contextualized analysis of the findings, helping to identify convergences, discrepancies, and gaps.

The results of the studies were analyzed based on the frequency of emerging themes and the consistency of findings in different contexts and discussed according to their relevance to the practice of Occupational Therapy.

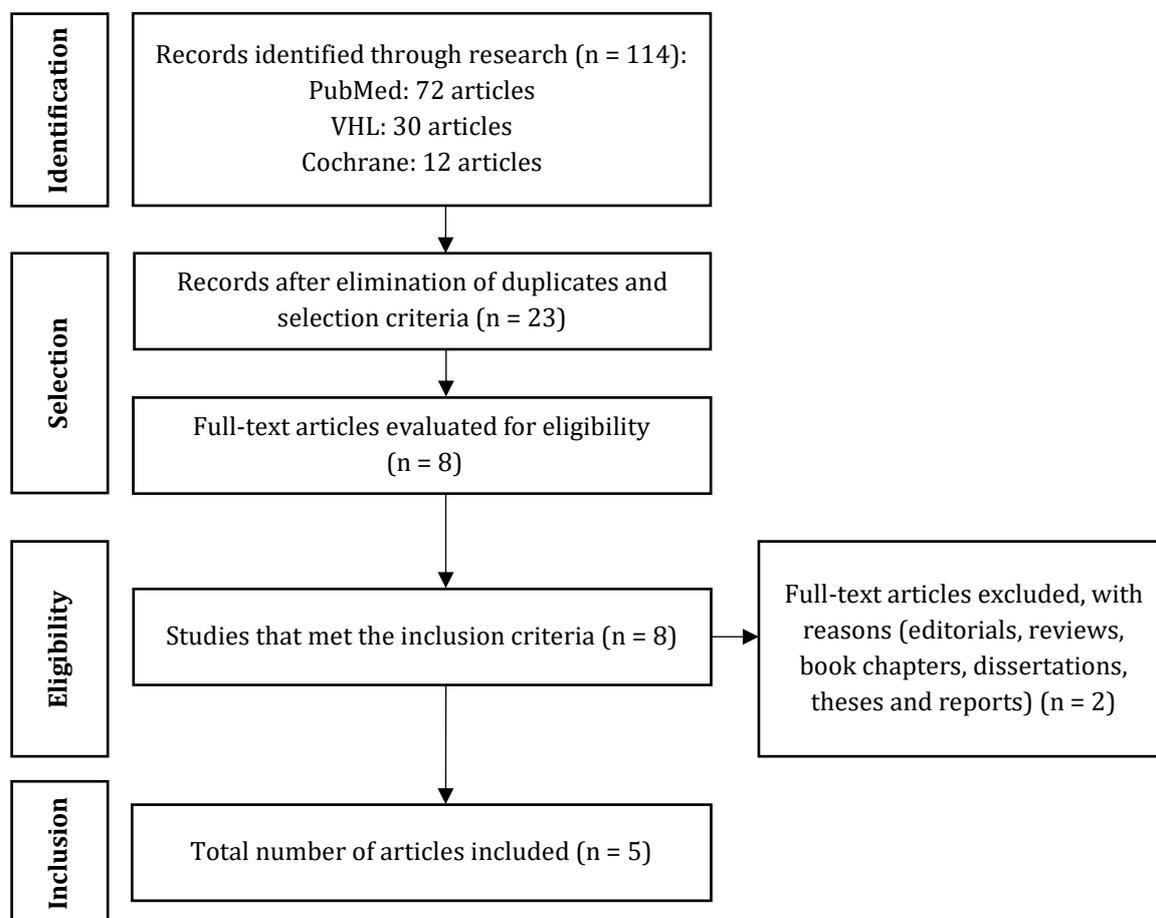
RESULTS

The selection process for the studies included in the review is explained in Figure 1. Initially, 114 studies were identified, and after applying the eligibility criteria, five were considered.

The selected studies are detailed in Table 1. The five published articles were from between 2005 and 2021, including functionality, feeding independence, promotion of well-being through activities such as relaxation and facilitation of daily activities in terminally ill patients, as well as approaches to promote participation and performance in ADLs.

From Table 1, the most recent studies^{15,16} describe collaborative and patient-centered care models, including Occupational Therapy in the planning of Palliative Care as part of an interdisciplinary team. Complementarily, the older studies¹²⁻¹⁴ focused on specific interventions, such as promoting feeding independence and the use of relaxation techniques.

Figure 1. Studies included based on occupational therapy in cancer patients and activities of daily living. Belém/PA, Brazil, 2023.



A temporal analysis of the articles shows that the five included studies - conducted in Canada, Sweden, the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom - described the role of Occupational Therapy in different contexts of oncological palliative care, with an emphasis on ADLs (Activities of Daily Living). The designs were mostly observational and qualitative. Although heterogeneous, the studies pointed to approaches related to maintaining functionality, supporting the performance of ADLs, and engaging in meaningful activities; some also described relaxation techniques as a therapeutic resource. Overall, the findings converge in highlighting the role of Occupational Therapy in promoting occupational participation in the face of disease progression.

Chart 1. Articles related to occupational therapy in cancer patients and activities of daily living, categorized by year and first author, title, objective, methods, country, sample, and main research results. Belém/PA, Brazil, 2023.

Year and first author	Title	Objective	Methods	Country	Sample	Main results
Lee (2005) ¹²	Improvement of feeding independence in end-stage cancer patients under palliative care-a prospective, uncontrolled study	To evaluate the effectiveness of Occupational Therapy in promoting feeding independence in terminally ill cancer patients in Palliative Care	A prospective, uncontrolled study with Occupational Therapy interventions focused on feeding	Japan	30 terminal cancer patients	There was a significant improvement in feeding independence after Occupational Therapy interventions, despite the advanced stage of the disease
Jeyasingam (2008) ¹³	A prospective study of unmet activity of daily living needs in palliative care in patients	This study aimed to investigate the unmet needs identified by patients and caregivers in activities of daily living within a hospital palliative care setting. A secondary objective was to compare the responses of patients, caregivers, and senior clinical professionals, as well as to assess the level of agreement among them	Prospective study with questionnaires administered to patients, caregivers, and clinical professionals	Australia	80 patients, 80 caregivers, and 20 clinical professionals	There was a discrepancy between patients' and caregivers' perceptions of unmet needs, with professionals underestimating some of the difficulties reported
Miller (2008) ¹⁴	A retrospective audit exploring the use of relaxation as an intervention in oncology and palliative care	To identify the nature of the references to the relaxation program, to explore the variety of relaxation techniques implemented, and to evaluate their overall effectiveness	Retrospective audit of referrals to relaxation programs in cancer patients and in palliative care	United Kingdom	50 patients who participated in relaxation programs	Relaxation techniques were effective in reducing anxiety and improving the quality of life of patients

Tavemark (2019) ¹⁵	Enabling activity in palliative care: focus groups among occupational therapists	To describe the experiences of occupational therapists in facilitating activities among clients in palliative care	Focus groups with occupational therapists	Sweden	15 Occupational Therapists who work with Palliative Care	Therapists reported that enabling activities improves patients' emotional well-being, despite limitations
Mueller (2021) ¹⁶	Addressing the Gap: Occupational Therapy in Hospice Care	Addressing knowledge gaps by comparing client demographics, ADL assistance needs, and service utilization between patients with and without Occupational Therapy services while receiving Palliative Care	Comparative study between two groups (with and without Occupational Therapy services)	United States	100 patients in Palliative Care (50 with Occupational Therapy and 50 without)	Patients who received Occupational Therapy demonstrated greater independence in ADLs (Activities of Daily Living) and improved quality of life

DISCUSSION

The studies highlight essential contributions of Occupational Therapy in oncological Palliative Care, which were previously under-detailed or under-discussed, but now deserve greater attention from researchers in the field. All studies express forms of intervention in ADLs (Activities of Daily Living), ranging from simple actions, such as promoting independent feeding, to more complex and integrated approaches that consider the patient holistically. These findings suggest that the context of Palliative Care is still underexplored, revealing initial forms of action by occupational therapists with this clientele.

The study conducted in the United States¹⁶ reveals gaps in the provision of Occupational Therapy services in palliative care, especially with regard to patients' access to occupational interventions. It is observed that the predominance of biomedical models, coupled with the structural limitations of services - such as scarcity of time and resources - generate the underutilization of this professional in multidisciplinary teams. Regarding this, it is believed that there is a lack of awareness about the potential impact of Occupational Therapy on the quality of life of patients in Palliative Care, especially in a setting where traditional interventions focus predominantly on medical aspects.

On the other hand, studies such as the one conducted in Japan¹² focus on specific interventions, such as promoting independent eating in terminally ill patients, suggesting that

approaches more focused on specific tasks can improve functionality, but that their effectiveness is enhanced when inserted into a comprehensive approach.

In pain and symptom management¹³, it was identified that occupational therapists work to empower patients to continue performing meaningful activities, even in the face of physical limitations and disease progression. This approach shows that occupational therapy not only offers functional support, but also promotes psychological well-being and symptom control, reinforcing its importance in maintaining quality of life in palliative care.

By empowering patients to perform their daily activities, a sense of control over their routine is created, which can reduce feelings of helplessness and promote mental health. Furthermore, participation in meaningful activities can help in pain management, as these activities shift the focus away from physical suffering and strengthen psychological resilience¹⁷.

The use of relaxation techniques in oncological and palliative practice suggests that Occupational Therapy can also play an important role in the emotional and psychological control of patients¹⁴. The evolution of how occupational therapy is viewed is reflected in the shift from one-off interventions to more comprehensive approaches, which affirm that the area should focus on a multifaceted approach - encompassing not only the physical body, but also emotional needs¹⁸. The shift in focus of interventions can be explained by the growing understanding that the patient experience in Palliative Care is multidimensional and cannot be addressed in isolation.

From the chronology of the articles, a clear evolution in the role of Occupational Therapy in Palliative Care can be seen. Older articles¹²⁻¹⁴ focused on specific and limited interventions, such as feeding and relaxation. The most recent articles^{15,16} offer a broader and more multidimensional view of occupational intervention.

The methodological diversity among the studies suggests that different approaches can be complementary. The integration of qualitative¹⁵ and quantitative^{12,14} methodologies provides a more comprehensive view of the needs and interventions in Occupational Therapy, reinforcing the importance of personalized and collaborative interventions.

Despite the advances observed, a reduced number of studies specifically address the role of Occupational Therapy in oncological palliative care, with regard to ADLs, were identified. This scarcity can be explained by the recent recognition of Occupational Therapy in the context of Palliative Care, in addition to the difficulties inherent in conducting rigorous research in a setting where patients are in advanced stages of the disease, with ethical and logistical implications.

The field is expanding, but still lacks greater theoretical and practical development. There is a need for more studies that address the impact of occupational therapy in a holistic way, highlighting the multifaceted role that this discipline can play in oncological palliative care¹⁹.

CONCLUSION

The included studies indicated that occupational interventions contribute to maintaining functionality and participation in meaningful activities, promoting autonomy, well-being, and adaptation in the face of disease progression.

Limitations include the small number of eligible studies and the limited number of databases consulted. On the other hand, the findings suggest that the systematic inclusion of occupational therapists in palliative care teams can promote more comprehensive care focused on functionality and quality of life. It is recommended that future research expand search strategies and use more robust methodologies.

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