

Do occupational therapists prescribe different thumb orthoses? A national survey among Brazilian health professionals.

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Thumb carpometacarpal (CMC) osteoarthritis (OA) can represent 10% of all OA cases, causing severe dysfunction and loss of occupational engagement to clients. Among treatment modalities, the use of orthoses to stabilize the thumb is common for pain relief and to improve hand function. Despite substantial research, there is insufficient evidence about the optimal use of orthoses. This may lead to practice variations within and across health professionals.

Objective: To describe the practice patterns on orthotics used by Brazilian healthcare professionals for the management of OA of the CMC joint.

Methods: An electronic questionnaire was sent to Occupational Therapists (OT), Physiotherapists and Rheumatologists between July and October 2014 through professional association mailing. Survey asked questions about the orthoses used during the treatment of patients with CMC OA including specifics about the design, materials, and barriers to use.

Results: There was no consensus about orthotic prescription among 275 professionals that answered the survey. OTs commonly used custom-made hand-based splints with a dorsal option. Rheumatologists often used off-the-shelf neoprene orthoses. Physiotherapists preferred rigid, off-the-shelf orthotics. Barriers reported include lack of knowledge about orthoses, no access to thermoplastics and institutional limitation. A wide range of orthoses was used and these varied on the number of joints immobilized, materials and clinical objectives.

Conclusion: There is substantial practice variation in the use of orthotics for CMC OA in Brazil. This is affected by profession and environmental issues. Education, access to materials and re-examination of the alignment of evidence and local policies might decrease practice variation.