

Massage Therapy

Good Medicine, Editorial Staff

Massage as a healing tool has been around for thousands of years in many cultures. Touching is a natural human reaction to pain and stress, and for conveying compassion and support. Think of the last time you bumped your head or had a sore calf. What did you do? Rubbed it, right? The same was true of our earliest ancestors. Healers throughout time and throughout the world have instinctually and independently developed a wide range of therapeutic techniques using touch. Many are still in use today, and with good reason. We now have scientific proof of the benefits of massage - benefits ranging from treating chronic diseases and injuries to alleviating the growing tensions of our modern lifestyles. Having a massage does more than just relax your body and mind - there are specific physiological and psychological changes which occur, even more so when massage is utilized as a preventative, frequent therapy and not simply mere luxury. Massage not only feels good, but it can cure what ails you.

The Consequences of Stress

Experts estimate that 80 percent to 90 percent of disease is stress-related. Massage and bodywork is there to combat that frightening number by helping us remember what it means to relax. The physical changes massage brings to your body can have a positive effect in many areas of your life. Besides increasing relaxation and decreasing anxiety, massage lowers your blood pressure, increases circulation, improves recovery from injury, helps you to sleep better and can increase your concentration. It reduces fatigue and gives you more energy to handle stressful situations.

Massage is a perfect elixir for good health, but it can also provide an integration of body and mind. By producing a meditative state or heightened awareness of living in the present moment, massage can provide emotional and spiritual balance, bringing with it true relaxation and peace.

The incredible benefits of massage are doubly powerful if taken in regular "doses." Dr. Maria Hernandez-Reif, from the Touch Research Institute (TRI) at the University of Miami, is known for her massage research, along with colleague Tiffany Field. Together, they and other researchers have done outstanding work proving the value of massage. While their studies have shown we can benefit from massage even in small doses (15 minutes of chair massage or a half-hour table session), Hernandez-Reif says they know from their research that receiving bodywork 2-3 times a week is highly beneficial. And if we lived in a fantasy world, Hernandez-Reif has the answer. "I feel a daily massage is optimal."

It's undoubtedly a wonderful thing when your therapist begins unwinding those stress-tightened muscles, and your day's troubles begin to fade away. But it's the cherry on top to know this "medicine" only gets better with frequency.

The Benefits of Massage

In an age of technical and, at times, impersonal medicine, massage offers a drug-free, non-invasive and humanistic approach based on the body's natural ability to heal itself. So what exactly are the benefits to receiving regular massage and/or bodywork treatments?

- Increases circulation, allowing the body to pump more oxygen and nutrients into tissues and vital organs.
- Stimulates the flow of lymph, the body's natural defense system, against toxic invaders. For example, in breast cancer patients, massage has been shown to increase the cells that fight cancer.
- Increased circulation of blood and lymph systems improves the condition of the body's largest organ - the skin.
- Relaxes and softens injured and overused muscles
- Reduces spasms and cramping
- Increases joint flexibility.
- Reduces recovery time, helps prepare for strenuous workouts and eliminates subsequent pains of the athlete at any level.
- Releases endorphins - the body's natural painkiller - and is being used in chronic illness, injury and recovery from surgery to control and relieve pain.
- Reduces post-surgery adhesions and edema and can be used to reduce and realign scar tissue after healing has occurred.
- Improves range-of-motion and decreases discomfort for patients with low back pain.
- Relieves pain for migraine sufferers and decreases the need for medication.
- Provides exercise and stretching for atrophied muscles and reduces shortening of the muscles for those with restricted range of motion.

The Need for Touch

As a society, we are touch deprived and this can lead to disease or emotional dysfunction. From the cradle to the nursing home, tactile stimulation and the emotional assurance of caring touch bring about a sense of well-being and security. In numerous studies conducted on massage for infants, TRI researchers have found improved weight gain and development in pre-term infants, improved weight gain and motor behavior in cocaine-exposed infants, and improved weight gain and decreased stress behavior in HIV-exposed infants. Full-term infants also benefit with increased alertness and social behavior, less crying and increased weight gain.

Benefits of Massage

by Mayo Clinic Staff

Massage is generally considered part of complementary and alternative medicine. It's increasingly being offered along with standard treatment for a wide range of medical conditions and situations.

Studies of the benefits of massage demonstrate that it is an effective treatment for reducing stress, pain and muscle tension.

While more research is needed to confirm the benefits of massage, some studies have found massage may also be helpful for:

- Anxiety
- Digestive disorders
- Fibromyalgia
- Headaches
- Insomnia related to stress
- Myofascial pain syndrome
- Soft tissue strains or injuries
- Sports injuries
- Temporomandibular joint pain

Beyond the benefits for specific conditions or diseases, some people enjoy massage because it often produces feelings of caring, comfort and connection.

Neuromuscular Therapy Massage

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Neuromuscular therapy is a form of soft tissue manipulation that aims to treat underlying causes of chronic pain involving the muscular and nervous systems. This medically-oriented form of massage addresses trigger points (tender muscles points), circulation, nerve compression, postural issues, and biomechanical problems that can be caused by repetitive movement injuries.

What Are the Health Benefits of Massage?

Many types of massage offer benefits beyond simple relaxation. Here are just a few of the health problems that may benefit from massage.

- **Back pain** . More than one study has shown the effectiveness of massage therapy for back pain. In fact, one 2003 study showed it worked better than acupuncture or spinal modification for persistent low back pain -- reducing the need for painkillers by 36%.
- **Headache** . Another type of pain -- headache -- also responds to massage therapy, as shown by more than one study. Massage therapy can reduce the number of migraines a person has and also improve sleep.
- **Osteoarthritis** . In the first clinical trial looking at the effectiveness of Swedish massage for knee osteoarthritis, participants who received a one-hour massage either one or two times a week had improvements in pain, stiffness, and function. The control group had no such change.
- **Cancer**. Used as a complement to traditional, Western medicine, massage can promote relaxation and reduce cancer symptoms or side effects of treatment. It may help reduce pain, swelling, fatigue, nausea, or depression, for example, or improve the function of your immune system.
- **Anxiety**. A review of more than 12 studies shows that massage helps relieve depression and anxiety. It lowered levels of cortisol by up to 50%. And massage increased levels of neurotransmitters that help reduce depression.