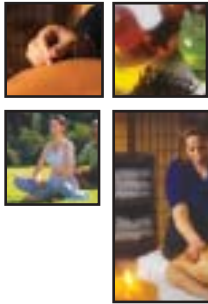




An evidence-based review of alternative therapies

Massage Therapy A Universal Alternative

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There are many different schools of massage, including Swedish, Thai, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Shiatsu and even offshoots of massage, like Cranial Sacral Therapy.

There has been a 36% increase in visits to massage therapists in the U.S. between 1990 and 1997. In 1998, a national U.S. survey of patients who reported back or neck pain within the last year revealed 14% had visited a massage therapist and 65% had found massage “very helpful.”¹

Anyone who has experienced therapeutic massage knows it feels good, but is there any scientific proof that massage is helpful for medical conditions?

What do the studies say?

Massage for back pain

Back pain is one of the most common reasons people visit a massage therapist. In one study, patients with subacute low-back pain were randomly assigned to one of four groups:

- comprehensive massage therapy,
- soft-tissue manipulation only,
- remedial exercise with posture education only or
- a placebo of sham laser therapy.

Each subject received six treatments within one month. The patients were eval-

Tiffany Field's summary of massage therapy²

Field, a researcher in this area, believes massage therapy generally facilitates growth and relieves pain.

- Preterm infants who were given a 15-minute massage three times/day for 10 days while still in the incubator gained 47% more weight than control groups and performed better on infant development scores.
- Similar results were found in cocaine-exposed babies, HIV-exposed babies and in full-term infants.
- When parents were taught to massage their infants, parents had less anxiety and reduced stress.
- Pregnant women who were massaged vs. those given relaxation therapy reported lowered anxiety and depression, less pain and fewer obstetrical and postnatal complications.
- Pain was reduced in debridement for burn patients, post-operative pain, pain in juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia.
- Patients with spinal cord injury and multiple sclerosis reported improvements in mood compared to controls.
- Massage has been shown to be effective in depression-related conditions.
- Medical school faculty and staff who received 15-minute chair massages during their lunch breaks reported heightened awareness.

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uated at baseline, after treatment and at one-month followup.


The comprehensive massage therapy group had improved function, less intense pain and a decrease in the quality of pain. At one-month followup, 63% of patients in the massage therapy group reported no pain, as compared with 27% of the soft-tissue manipulation group, 14% of the remedial exercise group and 0% of the sham laser therapy group.³

Massage for headache

Twenty-six migraine sufferers were randomly assigned to a wait-list control or two 30-minute massages per week for five consecutive weeks. The massage therapy patients had fewer distress symptoms, less pain, more headache-free days, fewer sleep disturbances and an increase in serotonin levels.⁴

The key message

Massage therapy seems to be a useful modality for many medical problems. The limiting factors, however, are the costs incurred by patients and the variability of the quality of different massage therapists.

Perhaps in the future, massage therapy could be more integrated into routine community care. Toward this end, more high-quality reproducible research needs to be funded. 

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Other studies on massage therapy

- A metaanalysis of massage therapy research looked at 37 studies involving 1,802 subjects that used random assignment. After a single massage, there was a statistically significant reduction of anxiety, blood pressure and heart rate. This is consistent with the theory that massage may promote a parasympathetic response.⁵
- One randomly assigned control trial evaluated 122 intensive care unit patients who received either massage, massage with 1% lavender oil or rest periods. Those who received massage with lavender oil reported a greater improvement in mood. The study was very brief and there were many methodologic weaknesses.⁶
- A randomly assigned, controlled trial examined 72 hospitalized children and adolescents; half were suffering from an adjustment disorder and half from depression. They either received a 30-minute back massage daily for five days or watched a relaxing video. Those who received the massage had significantly lower depression scores. However, the data was insufficient to judge the value of massage for depression.⁷

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