

The Power of Touch for Pain Relief: Basic Facts

Massage is well known for reducing stress and promoting relaxation. And, a growing body of research also shows that massage therapy is effective for relieving and managing chronic and acute pain, a significant national health problem. According to the National Institute for Health, more than one-third of all Americans will suffer from chronic pain at some point in their lives, and approximately 14 percent of all employees take time off from work due to pain. Increasingly, massage therapists are being incorporated into pain management programs of hospitals and health care organizations. The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations has suggested massage therapy as one means to manage pain without use of pharmaceuticals.

According to a recent American Hospital Association survey about their use of CAM (complementary and alternative medicine) therapies, among the 1,007 hospitals responding, nearly 82 percent of the hospitals offering CAM therapies included massage therapy among their health care offerings -- with more than 70 percent utilizing massage therapy for pain management and relief. In a recent consumer survey commissioned by AMTA, 91 percent of respondents agreed that massage can be effective in reducing pain, and nearly half of those polled (47 percent) have had a massage specifically for the purpose of relieving pain.

Consider recent clinical research on the efficacy of massage for pain relief:

- Massage therapy is more effective for chronic back pain than other complementary therapies.
- Massage therapy promotes relaxation and alleviates the perception of pain and anxiety in cancer patients.
- Massage therapy reduces post-traumatic headaches better than cold pack treatments.
- A pilot study conducted at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles found that massage, as part of hospital-based surgery treatment, reduces pain and muscle spasms in patients who have undergone heart bypass surgery.
- Massage stimulates the brain to produce endorphins.

How does massage relieve pain?

- A simple and direct strategy: working from the external, outer mechanisms of pain to the primary, root cause.
- Focuses on the entire body system and its relationship to soft tissue – not solely on the site of pain.

Benefits of massage for pain relief

- Helps patients become more aware of their bodies and the sources of pain.
- Better familiarizes patients with the pain they experience.
- Has an impact on the patient by virtue of human touch.
- Improves confidence by encouraging patients to effectively cope with their pain.

Finding a qualified massage therapist is paramount; only 33 states and the District of Columbia regulate the profession of massage therapy, Oregon being one of them.

How to Get the Most From Your Massage

1. Be as receptive and open to the process as possible.
2. Do not eat just before a massage session.
3. Be on time. If you arrive in a frenzied, rushed state, it will take longer to get to a relaxed state. Please let your massage therapist know in advance if you need to cancel. Many massage therapists require a 24 hour notice.
4. If you do not want to remove all your clothing, wear clothing that you will be comfortable wearing during the massage and will allow the massage therapist to touch and move the areas of your body you expect will need to be worked on.
5. Give the massage therapist accurate health information.
6. Good communication is very important. Before the session, let your massage therapist know what your needs are. During the massage session, report any discomfort, whether it is from the massage or due to any problems or distractions related to the environment, e.g., room temperature, music volume, lighting, etc. Feel free to give feedback to the massage therapist regarding the massage, e.g., amount of pressure, speed of movement, etc.
7. Don't be afraid to discuss any apprehensions or concerns. It is important that you be as comfortable as possible during your massage. Your massage therapist is a professional dedicated to do his or her best to help you feel at ease.
8. Some massage therapists like to play music during the massage session and may have music specially composed for relaxation and other effects. Others may find music distracting. Let your massage therapist know if you have any preferences regarding music if it is available.
9. Some people like to talk during a massage session, while others remain silent. If your massage therapist encourages you to talk or not talk, it is usually based on whether or not it seems to help let go of tension and getting in touch with oneself. Sometimes talking can be a way of unburdening oneself or opening up. Sometimes being silent can be a way of letting go of thoughts or concentrating. On the other hand, talking can be a way of "being in the head" and out of touch with one's body or feelings; and being silent can be a way of holding back or not opening up.
10. Breathing helps to facilitate relaxation. People often stop or limit their breathe when they feel anxious or a sensitive area is massaged. If you realize you are stopping your breathing, let yourself breathe.
11. Tightening up, i.e., contracting or hardening your muscles during the massage is counterproductive. If you are able to, relax those muscles. Let your massage therapist know this is happening. They may need to adjust the massage technique being used. They may also be able to help you relax the affected area.
12. If you find your thoughts are racing during the massage, one way to be more body-centered and to quiet the mind is to follow the hands of the massage therapist and focus on how the touch feels.
13. If anything is happening during the massage that you dislike or seems improper, you have the right to ask the massage therapist to stop. If necessary, you also have the right to end the session.
14. If you are dizzy or light headed after the massage, do not get off the table too fast.
15. Drink extra water after a massage.
16. Allow for some open, quiet time after your massage session if possible. Sometimes one needs a little time to integrate or absorb the results of the massage session or needs some "re-entry" time.
17. Massage has its greatest benefits over time. The therapeutic effects of massage are cumulative, so the more often a person gets a massage, the better he or she will feel and the more quickly one's body will respond. From one session to the next, relaxation deepens as the chronic patterns of stress in the body are affected and released. These changes are readily felt in day-to-day life as well, which adds another dimension of reinforcement. If you are getting massage to address chronic muscular tension or recovery from a soft tissue injury, more than one session is usually needed, so be prepared to schedule several sessions.