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An Emerging Trend in Wellness: Therapeutic Massage

Massage is more than just a spa experience.

Massage is a therapeutic treatment for ailments and diseases.

The benefits of Therapeutic Massage are numerous. Therapeutic massage helps older adults, as it does everyone, by increasing relaxation, improving circulation, relieving pain, strengthening the immune system, and improving sleep quality. Massage also can provide symptomatic relief from many common conditions that occur with age such as arthritis, diabetes, chronic back pain, fibromyalgia, Parkinson's disease, cancer, stroke and Alzheimer's disease. Furthermore, the benefits of enjoying the simple pleasure of human touch and companionship, even for just a brief period of time, are priceless for the lonely, isolated and/or depressed.

The National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) was established in 1999 to better understand the science of massage. Some of the current scientifically-supported benefits include:

- Accelerated healing from injury and illness
- Improve sleep quality
- Relieve stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness
- Improved quality of life and self-esteem
- Partially restore mobility lost due to Parkinson's disease or arthritis
- Reduce anxiety, pain, blood pressure and heart rate in stroke patients
- Increase blood circulation
- Alleviate of headache and pain

Massage and Pain

For older adults experiencing persistent pain, massage is associated with self-report of less limitation due to physical or emotional issues, better emotional health, more energy/less fatigue, better social functioning, and better overall health.¹

"There is emerging evidence that [massage] can make contributions in treating things like pain, where conventional medicine doesn't have all the answers," said Jack Killen, Jr., M.D., NCCAM's deputy director.²

The American College of Physicians and the American Pain Society recommend massage for treating low back pain.³ Therapeutic massage has been shown to be safe and provide significant improvement in function and symptoms in the short term for chronic neck pain⁴ and for the treatment of back pain.⁵

Massage and Arthritis

Massage is already widely used to treat arthritis, for which other treatments have concerning side effects. One study showed that full-body Swedish massage greatly improved symptoms of arthritis of the knee. Patients who had massages twice weekly for four weeks and once a week for an additional four weeks had less pain and stiffness and better range of motion than those who didn't get massages. They were also able to walk a 50-foot path more quickly.⁶

Recent research studies indicate that therapeutic massage may significantly reduce pain and enhance mood associated with osteoarthritis of the hands and/or spine.⁷

Massage and High Blood Pressure

Massage can have a relaxation effect in adults with high blood pressure. One study demonstrated

¹ Massage therapy usage and reported health in older adults experiencing persistent pain. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. July 2011;17(7):609-16.

² Andrea Peterson, "Don't Call it Pampering: Massage Wants to Be Medicine," *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2012.

³ www.acponline.org/mobile/clinicalguidelines/guidelines/low_back_pain_1007.html

⁴ Randomized trial of therapeutic massage for chronic neck pain. *Clinical Journal of Pain*. 2009; 25(3):233-238.

⁵ A comparison of the effects of 2 types of massage and usual care on chronic low-back pain: a randomized, controlled trial. *Annals of Internal Medicine*. 2011; 155(1):1-9.

⁶ Massage Therapy for Osteoarthritis of the Knee. *Archives of Internal Medicine*. 2006;166:2533-2538.

⁷ Self-management strategies to reduce pain and improve function among older adults in community settings: A review of the evidence. *Pain Medicine*. 2008;4:220-224.



that six 30-minute massages over six weeks reduced systolic blood pressure by 10 points (mmhg) and diastolic pressure by 5 points (mmhg).⁸

Massage and Stress

Touch remains a powerful sense while the other four senses begin to diminish as we age. Seniors respond particularly well to touch – both lowering the risk of anxiety and increasing their feelings of comfort.⁹

A 2010 study comparing the effects of one 45-minute Swedish massage to light touch found that people who got a massage had a large decrease in arginine-vasopressin, a hormone that normally increases with stress and aggressive behavior, and slightly lower levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, in their blood after the session. There was also a decrease in cytokine proteins related to inflammation and allergic reactions, and a boost in white blood cells that fight infection.¹⁰

Massage and Dementia

Massage doesn't have to be fancy. One study showed that simple hand massage appears to reduce agitation in some people with dementia.¹¹

Although published data of “hard scientific evidence” is still scant, there is a growing body of research to support the efficacy of skilled touch in dementia care, and anecdotal reports from practitioners working with this population are extremely positive.

A six-month pilot program on the use of massage therapy as an intervention for problem behaviors in nursing home residents with dementia, conducted at the Methodist Home in Chicago, found correlations between certain types of massage – including where it was applied on the body – and managing specific behaviors. For example:

- Back rubs worked wonders for those confined to wheelchairs, for people in chronic pain, and for residents exhibiting irritability or even anger.
- Foot massage proved calming for those exhibiting hyperactive behavior or restlessness and “wandering” behavior.
- Hand massage or face stroking seemed to help those exhibiting anxiety, worry, sadness and fearfulness.
- Massaging the temples, scalp and forehead helped reduce headaches and tension, and shoulder and neck massage seemed useful for those exhibiting tiredness, irritability, or mild upset.¹²

More recently, a 2010 study looking at the effect of massage therapy on physical and mental function and stress levels among elderly patients with dementia found that massage reduces aggressiveness and stress levels in patients with dementia.¹³

The Alzheimer's Association recognizes the value of massage to soothe an Alzheimer's patient who has become irritated and aggressive.¹⁴

Massage and Cancer

According to the Stanford University Cancer Center, short periods of massage therapy can provide physical and emotional benefits for cancer patients, such as relief of muscle tension, low back pain, chronic fatigue, anxiety, and depression.¹⁵

A 2008 study showed that cancer patients experienced statistically significant improvements in pain relief, physical and emotional distress, and quality of life from massage. Immediate improvement in pain and mood was greater with massage than with simple touch.¹⁶

Breast cancer survivors' quality of life can be improved with massage.¹⁷ For example, lymphedema, an accumulation of fluid in the lymph node area where cancer has been removed, is a specific problem many breast cancer survivors **face that can be help with massage.**¹⁸ Massage is an important component of a post-treatment plan.

⁸ The effect of deep-tissue massage therapy on blood pressure and heart rate. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. 2008;14:125-128.

⁹ Evie Barber, “Geriatric Massage: the Significant Power of Touch.” April 18, 2012. <http://betterhealthwashington.com/2012/04/geriatric-massage-the-significant-power-of-touch/>

¹⁰ A preliminary study of the effects of a single session of Swedish massage on hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal and immune function in normal individuals. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. 2010; 16(10): 1-10.

¹¹ Massage and touch for dementia. *Cochrane Database Systematic Review*. 2006; Oct 18;(4).

¹² Belle, Cynthia. 4th National Alzheimer's Disease Education Conf. presentation, Chicago, IL, July, 1995, reported in *Massage & Bodywork* magazine, February/March 2001.

¹³ Physical and psychological effects of 6-week tactile massage on elderly patients with severe dementia. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias*. 2010 Dec;25(8):680-6.

¹⁴ How to Respond When Dementia Causes Unpredictable Behaviors, Alzheimer's Association, 2012.

¹⁵ <http://cancer.stanford.edu/information/alternativeTherapy/massage.html>, accessed October 16, 2012.

¹⁶ Massage therapy versus simple touch to improve pain and mood in patients with advanced cancer: a randomized trial. *Annals of Internal Medicine*. 2008;149(6):369–379.

¹⁷ Effects of therapeutic massage on quality of life among patients with breast cancer during treatment. *J Alternative & Complementary Med*. 2009;15:373-380.

¹⁸ A randomized controlled crossover study of manual lymphatic drainage therapy in women with breast cancer-related lymphedema. *European Journal of Cancer Care (Engl)*. 2002 Dec;11(4):254-61.