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Massage: A relaxing way to relieve muscle tension

You might think of a massage as a luxury found in exotic spas and upscale health clubs. But did you know that massage, when combined with conventional treatments, can reduce anxiety and promote healing in people with various health conditions?

During a massage, a therapist manipulates your body's soft tissues — your muscles, skin and tendons — using his or her fingertips, hands and fists. Massages can be performed by several health care professionals, such as a massage therapist, physical therapist or occupational therapist. Several versions of massage exist, and they're performed in a variety of settings.

If you're interested in massage, learn about the different styles available and what to expect. Set realistic goals. A massage is likely to make you feel more relaxed, but it isn't likely to cure everything that ails you. And, if performed incorrectly, it might even hurt you. Learning about massages before you give one a try can help you make sure the experience will be one you'll enjoy.

Types of massage

Several types of massage exist. What style you choose depends on your personal preferences and goals. The types of massage differ in the hand strokes used on your body and the pressure applied with each stroke. Some common massage types include:

- **Swedish massage.** This is the most common form of massage in the United States. During a Swedish massage, your therapist uses long, smooth strokes and kneading movements along your skin. All parts of your body can be worked during this type of massage. A Swedish massage concentrates on the soft tissues near the surface of your skin and doesn't involve the heavier pressure needed to massage soft tissue deeper in your body.
- **Deep massage.** This method uses slow, heavy strokes to create direct pressure and friction on your muscles. The target of this massage is your deep muscle tissue. You might prefer a deep massage if the tension in your muscles feels more severe than your average, everyday muscle strain.
- **Sports massage.** Athletes use sports massage because it focuses on the specific muscle groups needed to participate in their sport. If you're a runner, for instance, a sports massage therapist might use some strokes from Swedish and deep massage to focus on the muscles in your legs that you use for running.
- **Craniosacral massage.** The goal of this style is to correct what practitioners refer to as imbalances or blockages in your head, neck and spine. The massage focuses on your

spine — from your head all the way down to the end of your spine (sacrum). Some practitioners claim removing blockages with this technique can improve problems with your senses, body movement and intelligence.

- **Neuromuscular massage.** Also called trigger point therapy or myotherapy, neuromuscular massage concentrates on painful areas in your muscles. Massage therapists use deep massage techniques to locate and release tender points in your muscles.
- **Rolfing.** This technique focuses on the connective tissue that forms a web of support throughout your body. Practitioners oftentimes use significant pressure in an attempt to realign your connective tissues, which they say are pulled out of line by everyday stress on your body. Rolfing is generally done in 10 sessions by a practitioner who uses his or her hands, knuckles and elbows.

Many other varieties of massages exist, including some in which the massage therapist uses his or her elbows, knees and feet to bring relief to your sore muscles. Some massages combine other touch therapies such as acupressure and reflexology — which practitioners say release your natural energy by stimulating pressure points in your body.

What to expect during a massage

No matter what kind of massage you choose, you should feel calm and relaxed during and after your massage. When you go for a massage, you can expect to:

- **Answer a few questions.** Your massage therapist will want to know what you want out of your massage. Are you looking for help with a pulled muscle? Massage therapists will also want to know about any medical conditions you may have. That way they can decide if massage is safe for you or how to make it safer.
- **Remove most of your clothes.** You'll be asked to remove your clothes, or at least most of them. Your massage therapist should give you privacy while you take your clothes off and give you a robe or a towel to cover yourself with. A good massage therapist will understand your modesty and keep you covered as much as possible throughout the massage.
- **Be asked to lie down.** Most massages will require you to lie on a padded table. Pillows or bolsters might be used to position you during the massage. This allows you to relax completely during the massage. Music usually plays softly while you're massaged.
- **Have oils and lotions used on your skin.** Some massage therapists use oils or lotions to reduce friction while massaging your body. If you're allergic to any ingredients commonly found in body oils and lotions, tell your massage therapist. He or she might have products without that ingredient. You may opt not to use oils and lotions.
- **Never feel pain.** Pain could indicate that something is wrong. If a massage therapist is pushing too hard, tell him or her to lighten the pressure. Your massage therapist will expect feedback from you to understand how best to massage you. Occasionally you may have a sensitive spot in a muscle that feels like a knot. It's likely to be uncomfortable while your massage therapist works it out. But if it becomes painful, speak up.
- **Spend about an hour.** Most table massages are about an hour, though some can be 30 minutes to 90 minutes long. It's your preference.

Realize that massage can be a useful tool in managing your health, but it's not the entire treatment. For many injuries and muscle conditions, massage may be a tool to make you feel better and experience less pain, but it doesn't take the place of standard treatments and exercises, including flexibility, strength training and aerobic conditioning.

Other options available

If taking your clothes off doesn't sound relaxing or if you're pressed for time, try a chair massage. These massages are conducted while you sit in a special chair that slopes forward so the massage therapist can work on your back. You keep your clothes on for this massage — it's usually done in the open, rather than a private room. You're likely to encounter chair massage stations in airports, malls and workplaces. Chair massages last anywhere from three minutes to 15 minutes or more.

Health and massage

Massage is beneficial for a variety of health conditions. Most people use massage for relaxation, anxiety or muscle soreness because it can release stress and tension in your muscles. Massage can also cause your body to release natural painkillers, and it boosts your immune system.

Some small studies have found massage helpful for:

- **Infant growth.** Massage encouraged weight gain in premature babies and reduced the number of days they stayed in the hospital.
- **Anxiety.** Massage reduced anxiety in depressed children and anorexic women. It also reduced anxiety and withdrawal symptoms in adults trying to quit smoking.
- **Pain.** Pain was decreased in studies of people with fibromyalgia, migraines and recent surgeries. Back pain also might be relieved by massage. However, back pain study results have been contradictory and more research is needed.
- **Enhancing your immune system.** People in massage studies with breast cancer and HIV showed an increased number of natural killer cells, which are thought to defend your body from viral and cancer cells.
- **Children with diabetes.** Children who were massaged every day by their parents were more likely to stick to their medication and diet regimens, which helped reduce their blood glucose levels.
- **Sports-related soreness.** Some athletes receive massages after exercise, especially to the muscles they use most in their sport or activity. A massage might help increase blood flow to your muscles and may reduce muscle soreness after you exercise.

Because massage involves direct contact with another person through touch, it can make you feel cared for. That special attention can improve self-image in people with physical disabilities and terminal illnesses. And using touch to convey caring can help children with severe physical disabilities.

Risks of massage

Massage is generally safe as long as it's done by a trained therapist. But massage isn't for everyone. And for some people it can even be dangerous. Discuss massage with your doctor before making an appointment if you have:

- Burns on the area to be massaged
- Open wounds on the area to be massaged
- Had a heart attack
- Cancer — you'll want to avoid direct pressure on the tumor area
- Deep vein thrombosis
- Unhealed fractures
- Rheumatoid arthritis in the area to be massaged
- Osteoporosis

In addition, talk to your doctor before getting a massage if you're pregnant.

Massage done improperly can lead to severe injuries. Ask your massage therapist about his or her training and qualifications — some states require licensing. And if any part of your massage doesn't feel right or is painful, speak up right away. Most serious problems come from too much pressure during massage. In rare circumstances, massage can cause:

- Internal bleeding
- Nerve damage
- Temporary paralysis

Talk to your doctor and your massage therapist if you have any concerns about your risk of injury. Asking questions can make you feel more at ease.

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