

More than a Good Feeling;

Massage for Better Lifelong Health

Rejuvenating Touch
Massage Therapy

Regular massage treatments can help to promote flexibility and increase overall, lifelong health.

Massage treatments are typically viewed as a luxury for the wealthy or for professional athletes. Growing evidence, however, supports the advantages of massage as not only a pleasant and relaxing treatment, but also as significant factors contributing to overall health for individuals of all ages. Regular massage treatments can help to reduce recovery time from exercise or injury, promote flexibility and improved athletic performance (whether professional or amateur), and increase lifelong overall health and well being through increased blood circulation, lower muscle tension and stress, cleansing muscle tissue of potentially harmful waste build-up and toxins created by strenuous exercise and normal body movement. In addition, massage treatments administered by experienced professional practitioners may compliment treatments by other holistic and medical professionals, such as chiropractors, acupuncturists, physical therapists and traditional medical doctors.

What Causes Muscle Pain?

To fully appreciate the longer term health benefits of massage, it is helpful to understand what occurs within muscle tissue activity and the problems created by age, injury, strenuous exercise or overexertion.

When a muscle or muscle group is stressed, pain may result as the body releases chemicals that stimulate and irritate nerve endings around and in muscle tissue. These nerve impulses send messages to the brain, indicating painful stress or injury to the muscle, the location and severity of the pain.

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Muscles automatically contract around such an area to support and protect tissue from further injury or stress. Prolonged pain can cause muscles to become habitually contracted, creating numbness, swelling and other irritants to nerve endings, as well as shortening of muscle fibers over time.

When in such a contracted state, muscles restrict the flow of blood, lymph and other fluids to the area, preventing healing nutrients from reaching tissue and the flushing of waste products and toxins (such as lactic acid produced from exercising) .

Trigger points may cause further movement restriction and loss of flexibility in other areas of the body.

Eventually, highly sensitive clusters of nerves called *trigger points* or pain spots may form. Muscles and connective tissue (called fascia) tend to stiffen and contract around these trigger points, causing further pain and muscle restriction. In many cases, muscle contraction around trigger points may cause further movement restriction and loss of flexibility in areas further away from the area.

Over time, prolonged muscle contraction, hardening and immobility may lead to postural, structural or other longer-term problems.

If pain persists and muscles remain contracted for prolonged periods, preventing proper blood circulation, muscle fibers may harden and the body produces collagen fibers, which are the building blocks of scar tissue and adhesions. While scar tissue is important to protect and allow injured areas to heal, extended periods of scarring and adhesion formation may cause tissue to become hardened and inflexible. Over time, this area of inflexibility may cause long-term problems, such as further injury, posture and structural issues or even permanent tissue damage.

How Massage Works

Regular and therapeutic massage can be helpful in preventing or relieving these conditions.

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Think of a muscle as a sponge. Alternately squeezing and releasing the sponge allows absorption and expulsion of fluid from the material. Now imagine this sponge-muscle as being well-used and very dirty; the dirt representing waste and toxic matter in the muscle. This dirt and waste may harden the sponge and hinder its flexibility and function in absorbing or flushing fluids. Placing the dirty sponge in a bath of warm, clean soapy water while kneading and squeezing the material allows the soapy water (think of nutrient-rich blood, lymph and other fluids in muscle tissue) to flush out the dirt and restore the spongy, flexible material to its (near) original state. Regular cleaning a sponge in this manner will generally prolong its life and keep it flexible and functional despite heavy use.

Massage works in a similar manner on muscle tissue. By kneading, working and stretching muscle fibers, massage breaks down hardened collagen fibers and adhesions, allowing greater blood flow and flushing of harmful waste material, helping the body's own healing powers to restore muscles to their normal condition.

Massage may also stimulate the release of endorphins, natural pain-relievers and mood-enhancers.

Research indicates massage may also stimulate the production and release of endorphin compounds that are thought to be naturally-produced pain relievers and mood-enhancers. Along with relief from pain and tension, these compounds may help the body to both mentally and physically relax.

Such relief may help to prevent further tensions and chemical imbalances in the body caused by stress. Prolonged stress has been shown to significantly contribute to longer-term health problems, such as:

- **Tension and migraine headaches,**
- **Upset stomachs, acid reflux disease, ulcers and other gastro-intestinal conditions,**
- **Depression**
- **Poor diet decisions and habits**
- **Alcohol and drug overuse or abuse**
- **High blood pressure and coronary conditions**
- **Vulnerability to infection and illness.**

All of the above, if not treated, could lead to serious longer-term health issues. In fact, one rather unappreciated benefit of receiving massage from another person is the fulfillment of the need for human touch and emotional support. Such support can be very effective in stress reduction and energy rejuvenation.

Massage Compliments Other Therapies

Massage compliments other holistic and traditional medical treatments:

Massage compliments chiropractic treatment by helping muscles realign with corrective spinal adjustments.

- **Chiropractic:** Chiropractic therapy seeks to adjust spinal irregularities and restore proper alignment, as well as to relieve pain often associated with subluxations or traumatic spinal injury. Massage can compliment these treatments by helping muscles realign with new spinal adjustments, thereby enhancing spinal support and speeding recovery time.
- **Acupuncture:** Acupuncture treatments are often used for stress reduction and holistic healing. Stimulation of nerve meridians located throughout the body help to restore the natural balance of nerve impulses and function. Massage can help to reduce nerve irritation causing such

imbalances and relax over-stimulated muscle tissue.

- **Physical Therapy:** Structural rehabilitation of body mechanics after a severe accident or injury may be enhanced and accelerated by massage. Physical therapy often involves controlled stress by stretching injured muscle and connective tissue as a short-term consequence of longer-term healing and proper functionality. Massage helps stressed muscle tissue heal and recover from such therapy so normal movement and range of motion may be achieved more quickly.

Massage helps stressed muscle tissue heal and recover from the controlled stress of physical therapy conditioning.

A Brief History of Massage

Massage has been cited as one of the oldest and simplest forms of medical care, dating back to early civilizations such as the Pharaoh-ruled Egyptians and dynasty Chinese eras. In fact, a Chinese book dated from 2,700 B.C. describes ‘the massage of skin and flesh, and exercises of hands and feet’, as treatment for common chills, fevers and even paralysis. Roman and Greek physicians were known to use massage to relieve pain and Julius Caesar was said to have a daily massage to relieve the neuralgia he reportedly suffered.

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Hippocrates, the Greek physician often recognized as the father of modern medicine and for whom the ethical physician’s code “Hippocratic Oath” was named, once wrote in 5 B.C. that “rubbing can bind a joint that is too loose and loosen a joint that is too rigid”.

Massage is a common practice in India and regular massage was practiced by feudal Japan during the heyday of the Samurai class. Shiatsu massage, or “massage with finger pressure and stretching, was developed in Japan and is a very effective method of acupuncture-like massage, using the body’s meridian points and finger-pressure to treat muscle. Swedish massage, the more well-known of Western methods, was developed by a Swedish doctor named Per Henrik Ling. Swedish massage combines many forms of Eastern and Greek/Roman techniques and methods. Massage was also used during World War I to treat soldiers afflicted by shell shock and nerve injury.

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What to Look for in a Massage Therapist

It may surprise many consumers that opening a massage business is not complicated. In fact, many massage therapists, reputable and not, operate as sole practitioners in very modest locations; some even from their homes! While location does not necessarily dictate the professionalism and competence of a therapist, there are a number of qualifications, designations and associations that are common among the true professionals in the field.

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Professional therapists will generally be licensed and nationally certified. To qualify as such, practitioners will have undergone at least 500 hours of classroom and practicum instruction in the areas of neurology, anatomy, physiology and massage techniques. Some practitioners have committed even more hours to training. To become nationally certified and licensed, practitioners must pass a comprehensive exam and also learn ancillary skills in CPR and first aid. Choosing a therapist with the proper training and experience is very important, since improperly-administered massage may actually harm (rather than help) the client. The truly professional therapist should also be aware of other potential issues with their clients, such as pathology or blood-thinning conditions, which must be considered in recommending a massage treatment.

The better practitioners may also belong to professional associations, such as the American Massage Therapist Association. The AMTA requires its members to take and pass continuing education classes of up to 40 credit hours per four years (or 10 hours per year). Members also must adhere to the AMTA Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility. (Visit the association website at www.amtmessage.org for more details).

Practitioners should encourage a warm, open, client-focused atmosphere.

Most importantly, however, consumers should look for a massage therapist who actively promotes trust and a warm, caring manner with his or her clients. An atmosphere of open, client-focused communication, allowing clients to comfortably discuss their conditions, issues and objectives, must be encouraged and practiced by the therapist. A practitioner's office should project a private, but comfortable, relaxing atmosphere. While no guarantee, these are signs of a true professional who may be trusted in providing an appropriate, yet pleasant experience in massage therapy.

Gioia DeSimone, LMT, AMTA, is a nationally certified massage therapist with over 850 hours of training and many years of experience in the practice of massage therapy. Her experience and continued training includes therapy for conditions such as tension headaches, work-related repetitive motion injuries and other occupational injuries, sport injuries, poor posture, arthritis and general muscle tension or soreness.

Depending upon the condition and the client's needs, Gioia applies techniques incorporating different disciplines of massage therapy, including Swedish and shiatsu massage, trigger-point, myofascial release, deep tissue and cross-fiber massage.

For questions or further information on how massage may help you obtain better lifelong health, contact Gioia for a free consultation:

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