

Under the spotlight: Massage

Can massage make a real difference to people with arthritis, lower back pain and fibromyalgia? **Iona Walton** investigates

Massage involves rubbing or kneading muscles and joints to relieve pain and tension and promote relaxation. Techniques that gently rotate and mobilise the joints can be incorporated, with the therapist adapting pressure and techniques to suit the client's needs and preferences.

There are many different types of massage; some treat the whole body while others – such as Indian head massage and various forms of remedial massage – focus on specific parts of the body, or problem areas. Therapists vary widely in their experience and qualifications.

How does it work?

Massage encourages muscle relaxation, helps reduce inflammation and stimulates healing of damaged tissues and muscles. Pressure and friction from the therapist's hands increases blood circulation. Although the biological mechanisms are not fully understood, deep mechanical massage and connective tissue massage have been reported to increase blood flow and reduce tension and anxiety.

In terms of how it improves mood and promotes relaxation, massage may stimulate the release of certain chemicals in the body, such as serotonin (mood enhancing) and endorphins (reduce pain perception).

“Massage – particularly when given to a client with arthritis – should not be painful,” Jennifer Wayte, president of the Federation of Holistic Therapists, explains. “If it is, tell your therapist so they modify the pressure or techniques used. Equally, if your health or symptoms change between appointments, inform your massage therapist so they can adjust the treatment.”



Jennifer Wayte is the president of the Federation of Holistic Therapists

After-care and self-care are an integral part of the treatment package; make sure that you understand any movements or exercises that the therapist suggests you do at home.

Many arthritic conditions go through episodes of inflammation with periods of remission in between. During times of inflammation, pain and swelling stops the person using the joint normally, which results in more restricted movement and this reduces joint function. This reduction can then become permanent until the next period of inflammation causes further reduction. Massage cannot be applied to the affected area when it is inflamed but a good therapist should try to improve movement and function during periods of remission in an effort to reverse the overall degeneration.

The evidence

An increasing body of evidence suggests that massage has many beneficial effects on health and well-being. There is currently no scientific evidence that massage can help people with rheumatoid arthritis, due to a lack of research, but some good quality studies



Image credit: Nick Webb

“Massage encourages muscle relaxation, helps reduce inflammation and stimulates healing of damaged tissues and muscles”

highlight that massage is effective in osteoarthritis and there is consistent evidence suggesting that massage is effective in treating some of the symptoms of fibromyalgia and low back pain.

“It is important to note that ‘treatment-specific’ benefits aside, there are other benefits to massage that are harder to measure from a research point of view, most of which are linked to the therapeutic relationship between the therapist and client,” explains Jennifer.

Side effects

A comprehensive review of the evidence about massage and arthritis – carried out by Arthritis Research UK – found that “while the therapy isn’t completely risk-free, side effects are rare (although more common when performed by an untrained individual) and serious side-effects are more rare still. Some cases of muscle soreness during or after the treatment have been reported, as have minor skin irritations and increased pain. Massage oil may cause allergic reactions.”

Choosing a therapist

So finding an appropriately trained therapist is key and whilst beauticians in every town seem to offer the service, the profession is currently unregulated in the UK, which is a real concern for people with serious and/or inflammatory conditions.

Clare Anvar has been a massage therapist for 10 years and specialises in chronic pain in her Kent-based practice, Evolve Massage. Passionate about people receiving great quality care, she warns that “the basic level

of anatomy and physiology that many therapists have is not enough to treat people with serious inflammatory conditions”.

“People with inflammatory conditions deserve to be massaged by therapists trained to the same level as physiotherapists, osteopaths and chiropractors,” she explains.

There is a lack of standardisation where training is concerned. However, the Institute of Sport and Remedial Massage (ISRM) offers a BTEC Level 5 qualification so that therapists can treat clients with musculoskeletal pain or dysfunction alongside physiotherapists, osteopaths and chiropractors. Mel Cash, who founded the institute, comments: “Some level 3 therapists are excellent and would be of great service to someone with inflammatory arthritis, but others are not experienced or qualified enough. The issue is that there is inconsistency when it comes to training. Our members have an excellent level of training and if they haven’t heard of a client’s exact condition, they will research the subject thoroughly before taking them on.”

But the ISRM currently only has 1,000 members and the majority are in the South-East.

At the very least you need to choose a massage therapist who is qualified, insured and regularly updates their knowledge and skills.

A good starting point is asking if the therapist is on the FHT Complementary Healthcare Therapist Register as it is approved by the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care – a body that is accountable to parliament.

“Then check that the therapist has a good understanding of your condition and autoimmune diseases as a whole,” Mel recommends.

As part of your first treatment you will receive a full consultation, during which the massage therapist will ask a range of questions about

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your health, diet and lifestyle. The therapist should ask for details about your condition, any triggers you’ve noticed, previous surgery and medication that you’re taking. In some instances, your doctor’s permission may be advised before treatments can begin.

How much does it cost?

The price of massage varies depending on where you live, length of session and if you’re booking more than one, but expect to pay £45–£60 for one hour. “It’s worth spending the extra money on a massage from a highly trained therapist once a month, than have two body massages, without any healing focus,” Clare recommends.

The first appointment

After gaining a full understanding about your health and lifestyle to ensure the treatment is appropriate, the therapist will explain what to expect from the session. Most massages last for an hour, though a back, neck and shoulder massage may take 30–40 minutes.

Massages usually take place on a special massage table or couch but some may require you to sit in a chair or lie on a futon-type mat on the floor. A nourishing oil or cream-based product will generally be used to provide a free-flowing massage, and towels carefully placed to ensure your modesty and keep you warm and comfortable.

Breaking the circle of pain

“Although ageing and weight gain influence the chance of getting osteoarthritis, the mechanisms behind all of the inflammatory joint conditions are not completely understood,” Clare outlines. “These are often diagnosed after a time of prolonged stress, sudden trauma or a virus, and the inflammatory phases can be made worse by stress.

“Depressive moods that can accompany chronic pain may make the pain worse and vice versa. People withdraw from activities that make them happy, becoming more reclusive and a prisoner to the pain.

“Pain can be perpetuated by the person compensating for the arthritic joint by protecting it when they move (such as limping or cradling an arm). This gradually incapacitates more of the body as it struggles to adapt.

“The psychological and hormonal aspects of prolonged pain are pivotal in understanding these complex problems. Breaking the psychological and physical patterns enables recovery to happen. Each set of circumstances is different and what might work for one will not work for another.

“Many of my clients come to me when they are desperate and convinced that they will never be free of physical pain. In addition to massage, I help them understand their condition and give them the tools to make informed choices about how to make changes and manage pain in a more effective way.” **AD**

Sharing experiences

We asked – on Facebook – about your experiences with massage and here’s what some of you said...



Sally Estes, aged 44 years, Illinois, US.

I have had polyarticular inflammatory arthritis and hip bursitis for 10 years and have used massage on and off for five years. But last year I found my “massage match”.

My massage therapist works at a wellness centre that includes physical therapy, yoga, acupuncture and meditation. She is perfect for me because she uses very little pressure on the ligaments and tendons. The technique she uses is called “active release therapy” although she prefers the term “positional release therapy”. She moves my body into positions that are supported by pillows or by her body and hands. My muscles stay in a resting state, but by shortening certain ones for 60–90 seconds the spasming stops on its own thus providing excellent relief.

I see her every 10–14 days which gives me lasting benefit and I do Pilates three times a week to keep my body moving and muscles strong.



Kerrie Graham, aged 40 years, Australia.

About six years ago I was diagnosed with Barmah Forest (a virus only found in Australia that leads to fever, joint pain and muscle tenderness). It is only supposed to last for six months, but I still had it two years later and it turns out that the virus triggered psoriatic arthritis.

I first tried massage about four years ago and was going off and on... just when things got bad. For the past year I’ve had a regular monthly appointment and see the same person. Besides the fact that he is a great myotherapist, I don’t need to explain everything every time I go in as I would if I used someone different.

I believe that everyone is different. You can listen to others’ advice and experience, but in the end you have to find what works best for you. Listen to your body – don’t wait until you feel so sore that you can hardly move before you see your doctor and book in for a massage. And make sure you keep your rheumatologist in the loop if you are trying any alternative products or techniques.



Further information

● Evolve Massage, visit www.evolvemassage.co.uk or tel 01892 723286

● The Federation of Holistic Therapists, visit www.fht.org.uk/register or tel 02380 624350

● The Institute of Sport and Remedial Massage, visit www.theisrm.com or tel 0208 450 5851