

# Massage Therapy

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## Introduction

Today, like never before, you can get a massage almost anywhere: at a spa, at a mall, at an airport, at a chiropractor's office or, of course, at a massage parlor. Massage therapy is more than just a way to unwind or loosen tense muscles; it is one of the fastest growing forms of alternative medicine in the country, and a growing body of evidence supports its efficacy. More and more physicians prescribe massage to complement traditional medical treatments for illness, injury and pain. Hospital workers use massage therapy for victims of heart attacks, strokes and cancer. Massage therapy is frequently offered in drug-treatment clinics, pain clinics and hospices. Professional sport teams use massage therapy to help athletes train more effectively, perform better and overcome injuries quickly. Massage therapy can be effective for adults, children, elderly people and even premature babies in incubation.

For the most part, the negative view once attached to massage as an unsavory parlor practice is gone. Today, more people than ever appreciate the positive value and therapeutic properties of a good massage. Most people feel brighter,

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more relaxed, refreshed and less anxiety ridden after a weekly (or sometimes daily) massage. Massage schools that provide training and certification abound. Gift certificates for massage therapy are popular gifts for friends and loved ones. A good massage is one of the most pleasant ways to treat yourself to a truly health-promoting experience.

You probably picked up this booklet because you want to know more about massage. Perhaps you are wondering which type of massage would be best for you. Maybe you're thinking of becoming a massage therapist! Among other things, this booklet provides a guide to different types of massage and their associated benefits. There's even a section on self-massage to help you experience massage therapy wherever you are!

### **History of Massage**

Massage, the act of rubbing or kneading muscles and soft tissue, stimulates circulation, increases suppleness, relieves tension and more. The art and practice of massage has developed in many cultures and is one of the oldest and simplest forms of medical therapy. Egyptian tomb paintings from 3000 to 2500 BC depict massage being performed. Egyptians are also credited with inventing what is known today as reflexology.

In Eastern cultures, massage has been continually practiced since ancient times. In China, during the second century BC, a book called *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* recommended massage for treating chills, fever and complete paralysis. Chinese doctors, martial arts practitioners, Buddhists and Taoists viewed touch as essential to their spiritual practice and offered massages for relaxation. They believed that illness arose due to deficiencies or imbalances in the energy along pathways called meridians, which represented physiological systems of the body. They also believed that massage techniques allowed energy to flow more harmoniously through these pathways, allowing the body to balance or heal itself naturally.

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Japanese monks studying Buddhism in China introduced Chinese massage techniques to Japan, giving rise to traditional Japanese massage, called *amma*, which evolved into the massage therapy known as Shiatsu.

For ancient Greeks and Romans, massage was a principal medical practice for pain relief. Roman physicians combined massage techniques with herbs and oils to treat various medical conditions, and Julius Caesar reportedly received a massage to treat neuralgia. Roman citizens received massages in public baths, and Roman athletes kept their bodies in peak condition with regular massages.

Hippocrates (460 BC–370 BC), the “father of medicine,” prescribed a combination of massage, proper diet, exercise, rest, fresh air and music to restore health. In his first writings on massage techniques, Hippocrates stated, “The physician must be experienced in many things, but assuredly also in rubbing, for things that have the same name have not always the same effects. For rubbing can bind a joint that is too loose, and loosen a joint that is too rigid...Rubbing can bind and loosen.”

Massage has also been widely practiced in Ayurveda, a traditional Indian system of holistic medicine, which places great emphasis on the therapeutic benefits of massage with aromatic oils and spices.

Ambroise Paré, a 16<sup>th</sup> century French doctor, encouraged massage therapy for various ills and ailments. Pehr Henrik Ling, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Swedish doctor, poet and educator, helped usher in physiotherapy with his system based on a study of gymnastics and physiology mixed with massage methods borrowed from China, Rome, Greece and Egypt. The Society of Trained Masseurs, established in London in 1894, practiced massage based on Ling’s methods. During World War I, massage was prescribed to soldiers suffering from shell shock or nerve injuries. Until 1934, St. Thomas’ Hospital in London had a department of massage therapy.

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The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of breakthroughs in medicine and pharmacology, and massage lost credence as physicians and physiotherapists began to favor pharmaceutical solutions to symptoms and electrical instruments for tissue stimulation. Massage remained outside the medical mainstream for many years, during which time its reputation became soiled by the advent of unsavory massage parlors where sexual acts were sometimes performed.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, interest in natural healing methods grew and therapeutic massage was reconsidered as a legitimate health practice with physical and emotional benefits. State regulation and industry licensing standards allowed massage therapists to earn a respectable standing through proper education and hands-on training. Currently, massage therapy is accepted as a legitimate form of complementary and alternative medicine that helps people heal and experience a higher quality of life.

### Benefits of Massage

As massage has been reintroduced into our culture as a viable healing method, its benefits have been tracked by health practitioners, clients and patients alike. The following lists the highlights of benefits from massage:

1. ***Massage relaxes the central nervous system.*** This is especially beneficial considering the amount of stress most people encounter every day. Daily tension can cause muscles to shorten and tighten. Furthermore, circulation can become impaired, breathing can become shallow and labored, and acids can build up in the blood and tissues. All this can cause painful knots in the muscles and leave one mentally and physically fatigued. A good massage helps people unwind and enter a state of total relaxation. As this happens, breathing deepens and becomes more regular, blood pressure normalizes and circulation improves. A good massage also improves our emotional state by helping us let go of stress and calming the mind and spirit.

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**2. *Massage helps to increase circulation to the tissue.***

Improved circulation brings fresh oxygen and nutrients to the cells while removing waste products. Acids accumulate in areas of the body with impaired circulation. These areas, known as ischemic tissue, often feel tight and tender. Massage strokes can increase blood flow to these areas, reducing pain and swelling. Regular massage therapy has been shown to significantly improve circulation and aid the whole body, including muscles, skin, connective tissue, ligaments and tendons.

**3. *Massage stimulates the lymphatic system.*** An instrumental part of the immune system, the lymphatic system parallels the vascular system and helps to move toxins and bacterial loads out of the body. Unlike the vascular system, which has the heart, the lymphatic system has no pump to move fluid. Instead, the lymphatic system depends on pressure created by movement, exercise, deep breathing or direct touch (like massage) to circulate lymph fluid. The pressure of massage strokes moves lymph fluid towards the heart along the one-way valves found in the lymph ducts. Massage can reduce lymphatic blockage and edema (swelling in the tissues). A special type of massage called lymphatic massage or manual lymph drainage is a popular choice for resolving lymphatic challenges.

**4. *Massage promotes overall well-being.*** Massage can relieve pain, stress-related illness, anxiety, depression and sleep disorders. It can also help people with headaches, high blood pressure, diabetes and postoperative swelling. Massage has also been shown to help maintain the normal function of internal organs, promote normal menstrual cycles, balance and relax the musculoskeletal structure, facilitate deeper breathing, help a person feel grounded, strengthen sexual vitality, calm and clear the mind, promote emotional stability and increase energy levels.

**5. *Massage creates a piezoelectric phenomenon in the body.*** Both inorganic and organic substances have the ability to generate electrical potential in response to mechanical stress or

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deformation. This is sometimes referred to as the piezoelectric phenomenon. (The English prefix *piezo-*, which means pressure, is derived from the Greek *piezein*, which means to squeeze or press.) When a massage therapist applies direct pressure to a body, the deformation of the underlying tissues, cells and molecules triggers piezoelectric charges. Most of this takes place in the collagen molecules found in the skin, muscles, tendons and bones. Massage therapy generates electrical impulses that travel to and through peripheral nerves and then conduct their way to the central nervous system. Additionally, piezoelectric charges move out in all directions through extracellular fluid and other molecular structures, creating “streaming potentials” that travel to the inner organs and create afferent impulses. These afferent impulses from the inner organs further stimulate the central nervous system and increase the power of positive functions of the organs. This may be why some people say they feel “grounded” or “recharged” after a good massage.

## Equipment

Massage therapists use specialized massage tables and chairs to position clients during massages. A typical commercial massage table has an easily cleaned, heavily padded surface and a horseshoe-shaped head support that allows clients to breathe easily while lying face down. Such a table can be stationary or portable.



*A massage table supports the client during massage therapy.*

Massage therapists may use an orthopedic pillow or bolster to correct body positioning.

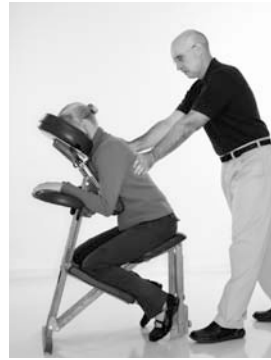
Ergonomic massage chairs function similarly to massage tables and may be stationary or portable. Massage chairs are easier to transport than massage tables, and clients do not need

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to disrobe to receive a chair massage. Due to these two factors, chair massages are common in public settings such as offices, outdoor festivals and shopping malls.

Massage therapists use many different types of oil to reduce friction, including fractionated coconut oil, grape seed oil, macadamia oil, almond oil, sesame oil, pecan oil and mustard oil. Some therapists mix essential oils such as neroli oil and pine oil with carrier oils. Salts are also used in association with oils to remove dry skin.



*Therapists may use a massage chair in public settings.*

## Types of Massage

Massage therapists may use several different techniques during a massage session, including friction, vibration, gliding, percussion, kneading and compression. Massage therapists may also incorporate passive and active stretching within a client's normal anatomical range of movement. Therapists may apply these techniques with or without the aid of massage oils, essential oils, herbal preparations, hot or cold stones, lotions and gels.

Over time, many different types of massage and bodywork have been developed, each with a unique role or purpose. What follows are descriptions of some of the most popular massage and bodywork techniques offered today.

## Acupressure

Acupressure, an ancient massage technique used by practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine, follows the principles of acupuncture, but without needles. Acupressure therapists use their fingertips, hands, elbows and knees to manipulate pressure points, which are located along meridians, or energy pathways, on the client's body. Certain pressure points correspond to parts of the body.

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Energy (called *chi*) can become blocked and weakened, leaving the body in a state of illness and fatigue. Acupressure therapists apply pressure to pressure points to remove blockages and restore the body's natural ability to heal itself. The result is a rejuvenated and healthy body.



*Like acupuncture points, pressure points are located along the body's energy meridians.*

Most massage therapists agree that acupressure treatment should be given in groups of eight to 10 sessions, depending on the seriousness of the condition being treated. People suffering from infectious diseases, skin ailments or conditions of heart, lungs or kidneys should avoid acupressure therapy, as should pregnant women.

Acupressure is effective for treating the following conditions:

- Arthritis
- Fibromyalgia
- Eyestrain
- Nausea
- Motion sickness
- Headaches
- Injury recovery
- Stress and muscle pain

## Aromatherapy Massage

Aromatherapy massage—massage therapy with the addition of highly concentrated plant oils called essential oils—is particularly suited to stress-related and emotional conditions. An aromatherapy massage therapist can select specific oils that are suited to needs of the client. For example, tangerine, lemon and rosemary oils are cleansing and energizing; eucalyptus, pine and tea tree oils are decongesting; chamomile, lavender and geranium oils are calming; cinnamon, ylang-ylang, clary, sage, rose and mint oils are stimulating.

Mixing essential oils with a carrier oil, such as almond oil or coconut oil, fills the air with a pleasant smell during the massage to create a pleasing atmosphere and a healing essence. The nostrils are pathways to the limbic system, which controls emotions and influences the central nervous system and

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*Essential oils can enhance the massage experience.*

hormones. As they are inhaled or absorbed through the skin, essential oil molecules transmit messages to the limbic system that affect breathing, heart rate, stress level, blood pressure, digestion, memory and immune function. For this reason, aromatherapy massage is a good choice for stress-related conditions such as headaches, premenstrual syndrome, insomnia, digestive disorders, depression and anxiety. Aromatherapy has been used successfully to ease symptoms of postpartum depression and emotional side effects of cancer such as fear and anxiety. Trained aromatherapy massage therapists can also suggest essential oil blends for their clients use at home between massage treatments.

Do not use aromatherapy massage if you are prone to blood clots, if you have heart disease or if you have an infectious skin disease, inflamed skin, a skin rash or open wounds. If you are pregnant, check with a physician before receiving aromatherapy massage. If your physician gives permission, make sure your massage therapist uses essential oils that are safe during pregnancy. Aromatherapy massage should not be performed directly over bruises, tumors, abdominal hernias or recent fractures, nor should it be performed immediately after surgery, radiation or chemotherapy.

## **Shiatsu Massage**

Shiatsu massage, which is gaining popularity in Europe and America, has roots in traditional Japanese medical practices. The word *Shiatsu* means “finger pressure.” Unlike other traditional forms of massage, which use kneading and friction, Shiatsu focuses on pressure and stretching. Like acupuncture, Shiatsu focuses on pressure points throughout the body, but Shiatsu therapists do not use needles; instead, they use their palms, fingers, thumbs, knuckles, elbows, knees and even feet to work along the body’s meridians, or energy pathways.

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Understood as a “touch communication,” Shiatsu is recommended to balance energy flow in the body, address aches and pains and strengthen vital organs.



*The yin-yang symbol represents the balance between the body's two energy forces.*

Shiatsu considers two energy forces: *yin*, or negative energy flow, and *yang*, or positive energy flow. Shiatsu practitioners consider the human body to be a microcosm of the universe governed by five elements and by yin and yang energy. The elements should be perfectly balanced within the body. Blocked or unbalanced energy channels contribute to disease. Energy imbalances can be either over-active (*jitsu*) or under-active (*kyoto*).

Shiatsu therapists apply localized pressure in rhythmic sequences along the meridians, tapping, squeezing and rubbing to release energy blockages and reintroduce the optimal flow of balanced energy through the body. While Shiatsu requires firm pressure, it is a relaxing massage that is unlikely to cause any side effects, including soreness. Most people are pleasantly surprised when trying Shiatsu for the first time.

In a typical Shiatsu session, the therapist will ask the client to wear loose, natural fiber clothing while lying on a mat on the floor (Shiatsu can also be done on massage tables). The therapist will then decide how and where to best apply pressure to correct energy imbalances or aid in injury repair. Because Shiatsu treats the whole being, from the physical to the spiritual, it may draw a variety of responses from the client, including emotional releases (laughter, tears, joy, relief, stillness, etc.). These reactions are meant to aid in the healing process.

Some of the disorders treated through Shiatsu include respiratory problems, leg cramps, migraines and other headaches, back pain, sciatica, lumbago, herniated disc, piriformis syndrome, failed back surgery syndrome, scoliosis, kyphosis, lordosis, rounded shoulders, neck pain, whiplash, shoulder and arm pain, joint immobility or pain, premenstrual tension, carpal tunnel syndrome, tennis/golfer's elbow, gastroin-

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