

# The Miracle of Massage Therapy

## Magic Fingers

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WebMD Feature

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If you've never had a massage, don't put it off -- not for a minute. In our stress-worn world, an all-over body massage might be just what you need.

Just ask Ms. Connelly, a plucky 60ish southern lady. Her fallopian tube cancer became evident only after it had spread through her pelvis. The weeks when she's getting chemotherapy are tough; her energy is zapped. She's making the best of the cards dealt her.

"I have my achy days," she tells WebMD. "I get these knots in my neck, in my back."

Massage helps relieve that tension, but it also does much more, says Becky Getz, RN, CMT, who is Connelly's massage therapist at Martha Jefferson Hospital in Charlottesville, Va.

Cancer patients like Connelly are often dehydrated, and a chemotherapy treatment causes areas of the body to become stiff, Getz tells WebMD. "I think massage helps bring chemotherapy, fluids, into the body a little more gently."

In fact, Getz works with many cancer patients long after their treatment -- soothing the dryness, tightness, and pain that surgery leaves behind. "Sometimes the effects of cancer last for years," she tells WebMD.

That's not all. Studies have shown that massage helps with all sorts of conditions -- arthritis, gastrointestinal problems, premenstrual syndrome (PMS) symptoms. Alzheimer's patients and kids with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may also benefit from massage.

Even more interesting: Kids with diabetes have more normal blood sugar levels after massage. Premature babies gain weight faster when they're massaged. Massage eases depression, keeps depressed mothers from giving birth too early, and prevents postpartum depression.

Massage does much more than relieve everyday stress, and studies are proving it.

## Ancient Health Practice Gaining Credibility

Massage is one of the oldest of health practices, found in ancient Chinese medical texts written some 4,000 years ago. Hippocrates advocated massage in the 4th century BC, as have doctors since then -- until the 1930s and '40s, when the practice was virtually abandoned as medicine became high-tech.

During the 1970s, massage went through a slight resurgence -- one that's finally taken hold in more recent years as healthcare practitioners become more attune to ancient healing practices -- and as Medicare and insurance payers have begun covering it.

"We believe in it in our clinic," says Ka-Kit Hui, MD, director of the Center for East-West Medicine at UCLA School of Medicine. "We believe it does more than just help people feel better."

In Chinese medicine, massage is called acupressure, he tells WebMD. In essence, massage and acupressure both work with the body's own healing systems -- the nervous system, blood vessels, lymphatic system.

"The concept is to remove stagnation," says Hui. "When your muscle spasms, it's a form of stagnation. The blood is not moving as smoothly as it should, either because of internal stress or as a reaction to pain."

He runs a "clinic of last resort" for patients with various pain problems -- fibromyalgia, neck spasms, frozen shoulder, and what's called "failed back syndrome." They've had two or three surgeries for back pain and nothing has helped.

"Oftentimes our patients either do not respond to pain medications or can't tolerate medications, or can't tolerate surgery or don't want surgery, or they fail surgery," he says. "We have been a resource center for them."

Doctors have been slow to refer patients to massage therapy simply because most aren't acquainted with it in their training, he tells WebMD.

"Today's massage therapists are better trained, better regulated than ever before," Hui says. "In prevention of disease, health promotion, massage may be an adjunct for patients who need our medication, who need our surgery. It may decrease complications, decrease pain and suffering."

### The Scientific Evidence

People with migraine pain, lower back pain, arthritis -- they all can benefit from massage. New parents know that babies who are massaged are calmer and sleep better.

The effects on premature babies are especially dramatic. The babies gain weight faster -- and leave the expensive hospital neonatal intensive care unit earlier -- if they are massaged, says Tiffany Field, PhD, a psychologist and director of the Touch Therapy Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine.

Field's own daughter was born prematurely in 1976 and inadvertently became her first study subject. "We were trying to help her grow," she tells WebMD. "We found that massage helped."

Since then, she's led 83 studies looking at massage's effects on depression, pain, autism, autoimmune disorders such as asthma and diabetes, and immunity.

Her research group is trying to understand the biological mechanisms that make massage so powerful -- looking at basic physiological measures such as heart rate, blood pressure, EEG; stress hormones such as cortisol; and chemicals in the brain that are thought to affect stress and pain.

Among her findings: Premature babies who are massaged three times a day have 47% more weight, are discharged six days earlier, and the hospital cost savings is approximately \$10,000.

Depressed mothers who received twice-weekly massages *before* they delivered had lower levels of cortisol, which reduced their risk of premature delivery. It also reduced their risk of postpartum depression. Something else: None of their babies was born with higher cortisol (which affects babies' development.)

Her work has also included children and adolescents:

- Two chair massages per week made adolescents less aggressive.
- Asthmatic children who received massages had increased air movement, lung function, less anxiety, and reduced stress.
- Teachers rated adolescents with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as being less hyperactive -- and more able to spend time on tasks -- following one month of twice-weekly massages. The adolescents rated themselves as happier and were observed as fidgeting less.

During massage, a major nerve in the body called the vagus nerve is stimulated, which slows heart rate, Field explains. "The heart needs to be slowed down for a child to pay attention. We think that's how it works with ADHD."

Other findings:

- Autistic children were more sensitive to touch, paid more attention to sounds, and related to teachers better after massage.
- When diabetic children received regular massages from parents, glucose levels decreased to normal range; they also followed diet requirements better.

In a recently published paper, Field reported that when patients with fibromyalgia had massages, they had less pain and slept better. They also had lower levels of "substance P," a chemical messenger for pain.

She speculates that massage works because it elevates serotonin -- the body's anti-pain hormone -- and reduces cortisol, the stress hormone.

### **Ready for a Massage?**

Stress is indeed a big problem for everyone these days, and massage is a legitimate way to eliminate that stress. People who are "big exercisers" also need to give their bodies a break, Getz says.

"We all need to give ourselves a focused time to relax," Getz tells WebMD. "We're all operating on flight or fight."

If you're slightly reluctant about that first massage, just relax, she says. "A professional therapist will provide professional treatment, professional draping. All trained massage therapists are very conscious of people's fears about being touched and can help make you comfortable."

To find a good massage therapist: Massage therapy schools often offer discounted massages performed by students who are near the end of their training.

The American Massage Therapy Association also offers a regional "find a massage therapist" database on its web site.

[www.psychologytoday.webmd.com/content/article/49/40050.htm](http://www.psychologytoday.webmd.com/content/article/49/40050.htm)