

Information on massage



This evidence based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about the services that we offer. You may tell us how useful you have found this using the feedback forms provided. If you'd like more information on how to access the range of services we provide, please contact the helpline at the end of this information sheet.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care Opinion

We support this therapy and include it as part of the Bristol Approach <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	We support this therapy, but do not offer it as part of the Bristol Approach <input type="checkbox"/>	We do not support this therapy <input type="checkbox"/>
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In brief

Massage is an ancient and modern practice used throughout the world. It involves manipulating the soft tissues of the body and has been traditionally offered to encourage wellbeing, relaxation, general health, to aid recovery from injury and alleviate symptoms of disease. People with cancer who have had massage report physical, emotional and psychological benefits. There is randomised controlled trial research evidence to suggest massage can help sleep, improve the immune system and decrease fatigue and nausea. Studies have also looked at anxiety, depression and pain but have not reached a conclusion. More high quality research is needed into these and other benefits of massage. Penny Brohn Cancer Care supports massage as a safe and beneficial therapy for those with cancer only when practiced by a therapist with appropriate experience and/or training. Deep tissue massage is not recommended for those with active cancer.

Practitioner Perspective

"At Penny Brohn Cancer Care, we have long recognised that the caring touch of an experienced bodyworker can act as a powerful catalyst for healing. Our experience convinces us that regular bodywork sessions can lead to improved physical and emotional confidence, ease with emotional expression and a renewed sense of hope. Touch can relieve physical symptoms, help release emotions and rebuild self-esteem."

"Massage can give people the opportunity to live more fully in their body, leading to greater acceptance of their physical and emotional circumstances, which may reduce the sense of isolation that some people experience. Massage can be powerful in restoring a sense of wholeness and balance, providing a space for fresh insight and the potential for transformation and letting go of fear."



More information: What is massage?

Massage is an ancient practice. There are references to its use as far back as 2700BCE in China, and records suggest it was also used in Japanese, Arabic, Egyptian, Indian, Persian, Greek and Roman cultures¹. Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, described the use of massage techniques for a wide range of conditions from sprains to constipation.

Modern massage involves the manipulation of muscles and soft tissues to aid health, wellbeing, circulation and relaxation. The level of touch used can be light and gentle or deep and quite strong. Massage in Europe has developed into many different practices which draw on various traditions, most commonly on Swedish massage techniques. Here are some examples:

Swedish or classical massage –the development of Swedish massage is attributed to both Swedish physician Henri Peter Ling, and the Dutch physician Johan Mezger. Historians disagree over who was the true founder. Both worked in the early 19th century in Europe. Today, Swedish masseurs use five basic techniques: vibration, tapping, kneading, stroking and friction.

Aromatherapy massage – Aromatherapy massage therapists select appropriate oils to add to the effects of the massage, which is usually Swedish in style. The oils may be added to the massage oil or vaporised on an aromatherapy burner. Please see our other sheet for more about aromatherapy.

Holistic massage – takes into account the whole person, mind, body and spirit. The massage usually involves techniques similar to Swedish and deep tissue massage. The therapist may include advice about nutrition, exercise and lifestyle.

Sports massage – uses various massage techniques pre- and post-activity to help athletes prevent injury and maintain a well-balanced musculo-skeletal system.

Remedial massage – much like sports massage in technique, the aim is to relieve pain caused by muscles, tendons and ligaments as a result of injury or postural problems.

Deep tissue massage – is practiced by highly trained therapists who reach beyond the superficial layer of muscles to the muscles underneath. It is used generally for recovery from injury, muscular pain, and inflammation-related pain from arthritis and tendonitis. It is not recommended for those with active cancer².

A therapist may use a combination of techniques, and many other therapies such as traditional Chinese medicine (T'ui na) and reflexology, shiatsu and physiotherapy use massage-like techniques. Massage does not include practices which involve the manipulation of the skeletal system such as osteopathy and chiropractics.

What happens in a massage session?

In general, a session can be anything from 15 minutes to an hour. Shorter sessions are used where a specific area such as the shoulders or feet are to be treated, whilst a full body massage requires at least half an hour and is more often up to an hour in length.

The therapist will start by asking some questions about why the client has come for a massage and about their state of health. This may include questions about diet, lifestyle and psychological and/or spiritual wellbeing.

Massage may be given when lying on a massage table or when seated on a chair, depending on the area to be treated. Pillows or towels may be used as support to

specific areas to aid complete relaxation. Music may be played during the session. Most types of massage require direct contact with the skin, so the removal of some clothing is essential. The therapist will give the client privacy to do this. Massage therapists will often use towels or sheets to cover parts of the body they are not treating.

Oil or lotion can be used to lubricate the massage and prevent discomfort from friction. In the case of aromatherapy massage, appropriate essential oils may be added. The types of techniques used can vary from light, smooth and gentle to deep and vigorous. Techniques include long strokes, kneading, quick tapping, friction, stretching and pressure on specific points. The therapist may use their forearms and elbows and even specially designed massage tools as well as their hands. Whilst massage is usually a very relaxing experience, some styles can involve quite a lot of pressure and may even be uncomfortable for a time whilst knots or tensions in the tissues are worked on. People generally report feeling relaxed and refreshed after a session.

What are the providers' claims?

Massage is offered for pain relief, muscular and joint problems such as injury or arthritis, stress-reduction and relaxation, general health and wellbeing. For people with cancer it is offered for these conditions but not as a cure for cancer itself.

There are a number of theories about how massage works and not enough good quality research has been done. On a physical level, it is thought that massage helps remove lactic acid and other toxins from tissues, stimulates oxygenation and the delivery of nutrients to the tissues, breaks-up scar tissue, induces the relaxation of muscle fibres and stimulates the healing of muscles and connective tissue¹. It is also thought to bring about relaxation in the central and peripheral nervous systems, which lowers the heart rate and blood pressure, and changes hormone levels in the blood¹. These effects are thought to have a positive impact on the immune system.

What do people who have had massage say about it?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can tell us what having a therapy was like for the people involved in the study, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone (this is dealt with in the section "What's the evidence?").

People who have had massage describe many positive experiences and this has been reported in qualitative research about massage. The benefits shown by this type of research include: relief from suffering, a moment of "getting away", a sense of strength, empowerment and a sense of being special. Also, people describe the welcome distraction from a frightening experience when massage was given whilst receiving chemotherapy. They found that it helped them turn from negative to positive thoughts, was relaxing, and "felt good". In addition, massage produced relaxation, reduced discomfort, better sleep and being more at ease with an altered body. People also welcomed the opportunity to talk openly about negative feelings and to be supported emotionally and physically.

Are there any legal issues?

There is no legal regulation of massage therapists in the UK at present, nor any requirement for them to have had formal training in order to practice. However, most therapists are well trained and encouraged to join one of a number of professional associations. The General Council for Massage Therapy is promoting the self-regulation of massage therapists. Please see below for contact details.

How much does it cost?

Massage therapy usually costs between £20 and £60 for an hour session.

What's the evidence?

This is a summary of our research findings. A full list of references used to write this section is available upon request.

There is randomised controlled trial research evidence to suggest massage can help sleep, improve the immune system and decrease fatigue and nausea. Studies have also looked at anxiety, depression and pain but have not reached a conclusion. More high quality research is needed into these and other benefits of massage.

Is massage safe?

In the past some have held the view that massage may disperse malignant cells. This is not now thought to be the case. Gentle massage to areas not affected by cancer or its treatments, when practiced by a therapist who has had appropriate experience or training, is considered safe and can bring many benefits. Deep massage, however, is not appropriate for those with low platelet counts or active (metastatic) cancer, as it can activate unhelpful inflammatory responses. Areas of broken skin, infections and recent scar tissue should also be avoided.

Resources used

A full list of references used to write this sheet, including the research literature, is available upon request. Please call the helpline.

1. Natural Standard [monograph on the internet]. Massage. [cited October 2007]. Subscription required to access at: www.naturalstandard.com
2. MacDonald G. Medicine Hands: massage therapy for people with cancer. 2nd Edition. Findhorn Press. 2007.

Other sources of information

Other organisations who offer information on complementary therapies:

- Foundation for Integrated Health. Web: <http://www.fih.org.uk>
- NHS National Library for Health. Web: <http://www.library.nhs.uk/cam>

Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer:

- Cancer Research UK. Tel: 0207 009 8820, web: www.cancerresearchuk.org
- NHS Direct. Tel: 08 45 46 47, web: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
- Cancerbackup. Tel: 0808 800 1234, web: www.cancerbackup.org.uk
- Macmillan CancerLine. Tel: 0808 808 2020, web: www.macmillan.org.uk

National organisations that represent the therapy:

- General Council for Massage Therapy, Tel: 0870 850 4452,
Web: www.gcmt.org.uk/

Statement

Our information and research is designed to help you make informed choices about the services that we provide. From time to time, for illustrative purposes, we may make reference to commonly available products (such as relaxation CDs and

popular self-help books). We do not endorse or advertise the use of any specific product.

If you have any questions please contact us

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