

Long-Lasting Relief from Chronic Back and Neck Pain

If you suffer from neck or back pain and/or sciatica, you likely know that your pain is centered in musculoskeletal system. Injuries to your spine cause muscle spasm. Your body becomes twisted when muscles tighten, shortening some muscles and stretching others. With sciatica, you also have nerve irritation from disk injury and/or compression of one of five interrelated nerve roots, causing further pain and spasms. Now add to that the stresses of everyday life and the workplace plus restricted range of motion, and your neck or back pain may become chronic if you haven't experienced healing by then.

The American Pain Association estimated that chronic pain affects approximately 86 million Americans (2001). A similar Canadian study reported that some 31% of Canadians are likewise affected. More than 50% of Americans experience back pain each year, and most have pain for more than 1 week. The challenge is to find and stay with a program of effective treatment for pain relief, increase mobility and promote healing. One of the most effective methods for long-lasting pain relief and healing has been found: Massage therapy.

Massage Therapy

Massage therapy has a history thousands of years old in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, and has found its place in North America. Massage therapy is beneficial in the symptomatic treatment of chronic neck and lower back pain, relaxes the mind as well as the musculature, and increases the pain threshold, possibly through the release of endorphins. It also aids in the release of toxins that come from the lymphatic system, and lactic acid from the muscles and surrounding tissues. It can also enhance local blood flow which accelerates the flushing of these waste materials. And there are even more benefits: across studies, decreases have been noted in anxiety, depression and the stress hormone Cortisol. Bottom line? Massage therapy offers efficacy that other methods of treatment cannot, ranking highly in proven effectiveness for pain relief. It boosts the immune system, reduces anxiety, lowers blood pressure and has been effective in treating migraines. Because massage directly or indirectly affects every system of the body, it promotes wellness, prevents illness and injury and speeds recovery. Few if any other pain relief alternatives can offer such a long list of benefits.

No matter how the results square with the research, the net gain is in pain mediation. That may sound boastful considering the wide range of differing massage therapy types and techniques. But in large numbers of studies done within this decade, participants with neck and low back pain were found to have a reduction in pain and an increase in their mobility after Massage therapy. Research has clearly indicated its effectiveness in alleviating pain either alone, or in conjunction with another form of therapy such as chiropractic treatment.

What Exactly Is Massage Therapy?

It is a form of treatment that is part of the complementary and alternative medical therapy movement. Defined as manual or apparatusive massage of muscular and soft tissue structures of the back and neck, Massage therapy can be performed for healing, relaxation, or both. It is differentiated from Physiotherapy, or Physical Therapy (PT), referred to as Medical Level massage. Physical therapists use an individual's history and physical examination to arrive at a diagnosis and establish a management plan, sometimes incorporating laboratory and imaging results. Professional Massage therapists, although state-certified, do not do diagnoses. They may consult with doctors to gain information helpful in making their assessment of the client, but will typically gain that assessment via brief consultation and review of symptoms, medical history and lifestyle.

The typical message takes between 40 and 90 minutes and is conducted in a softly-lighted room. Often, relaxing music is playing in the background and the atmosphere, along with treatment ,

encourage relaxation in the client. By using their hands, elbows and forearms, therapists press, rub and knead superficial layers of muscle and soft tissues of the body, using massage oil or lotion. Moderate to deep pressures are applied, depending on the technique being implemented.

Types of Massage

Soft tissue therapy is the assessment, treatment and management of soft tissue injury, pain and dysfunction—primarily of the musculoskeletal system. MTs and other licensed health care professionals provide soft tissue manual therapy. Included among the many types are:

Swedish massage: the most widespread treatment used in the United States. Generally soothing, it involves the use of kneading and friction in long strokes and deep circular movements. Most well-known massage techniques fall under the heading of Swedish massage.

Myofascial therapy: targets the muscle and myofascial systems, promotes flexibility and mobility of the body's connective tissues (fascia).

Trigger Point therapy: focuses deep pressure on myofascial Trigger Points—knotted muscle fibers that are painful and tender when pressed.

Deep Tissue massage: involves intense pressure and patterns of slow strokes to relieve tightness or knotting in the deep layers of muscles.

Sustained Pressure: also known as ischemic or digital pressure, it alleviates hypertonic (tight) areas within muscle and fascia.

Other variations may include Indian Head massage, Lomi Lomi, Joint Mobilization, Thai massage, Reflexology, Acupressure and Sports massage.

Massage Therapy and Low Back and Neck Pain

Chronic low back pain sufferers find enduring results from massage therapy, according to a study conducted by Boston's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (a Teaching Hospital of Harvard Medical School) and the Center for Health Studies. A study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* also supported the idea that massage therapy produces better results for low back pain than other therapies, including acupuncture and spinal modification.

Across a range of complementary alternative medical treatment studies lasting from several weeks to one year, massage therapy proved the most beneficial in relieving chronic pain and maintaining relief over a long period of time. The studies, taken from several key sources, were randomized—no single study was "weighted" to favor one treatment method over another. For sufferers of neck and back pain, massage therapy and physiotherapy showed the most improvement over other methods. Furthermore, over the intervening months after treatments were concluded, those who had received massage therapy had fewer bouts of reoccurring pain than those treated by PT.

Which Type is Right for You?

Age, physical condition, muscle tone, conditions of injury and other individual factors call for separate, specific massage techniques. For instance, Deep Tissue massage is generally not recommended for a patient suffering from sciatica, but it can provide relief from low back pain. Each technique has its own best areas of effectiveness and application.

That being said, Trigger Point therapy has recently gained ground as an effective treatment for the relief of neck and back pain, and is now commonly performed by professional MTs.

Trigger Points become painful when certain areas of muscles experience cramping and become knotted as a result of injury to the back or neck. However, the pain is "referred," meaning it can reside far from the injured area. Therapists locate these trouble spots and may use a special tool combined with hand pressure to un-knot the muscle. Once cramping ceases, the body realigns, allowing a full range of motion to return.

Treatment for Sciatica deserves special mention. Its two primary causes are Piriformis Syndrome and nerve compression due to injury. With Piriformis, the sciatic nerve may be misaligned in the area of the piriformis muscle, causing nerve irritation. Pain is often accompanied by numbness or tingling and leg movement may be limited. Muscular imbalance often twists the body, amplifying pain. Whereas most massage techniques aren't conducted near nerves, that is not the case with sciatica and Piriformis treatment, which will likely employ the use of static compression or longitudinal stripping. Compressing and stripping the muscle while it is under contraction magnifies the effect of pressure applied without having to actually press hard. This allows the therapist to go deeper into the muscle but not impinge upon the sciatic nerve.

Conversely, massage to relieve back and neck pain may make greater use of Trigger Point therapy, Deep Tissue massage, Sustained Pressure and other focused pressure techniques used away from the nerves.

Tips for Introducing Massage Therapy into your Treatment Regimen

Why not join 39+ million Americans who have at least one massage treatment each year by a licensed MT? You can search for MT professionals near you—or there are 2 major MT member groups that offer online resources...

American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) www.amtamassage.org/FindAMassage/locator.aspx
Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals (ABMP) www.massagetherapy.com/find

After treatment a therapist may issue instructions from time to time. For instance, you may be advised to take a hot shower or bath upon arriving home from treatment, to allow the release of lactic acid out of your pores. Lactic acid is found throughout the body but during massage, it tends to build up in the muscles being treated. Hot water draws out these higher concentrations of lactic acid. If they are not allowed to evacuate the body, they often irritate the tissues and bring on unnecessary pain in the same muscles being relieved by massage! Please be sure to follow your therapist's post-treatment instructions precisely.

Finally, massage is more likely to work long-term when combined with exercises (usually stretching) and education. This was concluded after a newly-updated Cochrane review of studies comparing massage therapy to other methods of pain relief. New, high quality trials show that massage gives relief from back pain that has continued for many weeks or months - and the benefit may continue at least a year after the course of massage is over.

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