

# What Massage Can Do For You

## Beyond Pain Relief, Massage is Valuable for Preventive Care

Karrie Osborn

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Whether it is an aching back, recovery from an injury, a case of carpal tunnel syndrome, or a host of other debilitating physiological conditions, there's no doubt massage and bodywork works to relieve pain. But once your therapist has helped you tackle your pain, do you quit calling? When the pain is gone, are you gone, too?

Massage therapy is highly effective for pain relief, but it is an amazing preventive therapy as well. Massage helps build and maintain a healthy body (and mind), it combats stress, and it works to

Massage can play an important role in a good health-care regimen. Just as you eat healthily, exercise regularly, and take your vitamins to ward off illness and maintain a fit body, you should consider making frequent massage a part of your wellness lifestyle.

According to Benny Vaughn, a sports massage expert in Fort Worth, Texas, one of the benefits of consistent and regular massage therapy is better flexibility. "This happens because regular and structured touch stimulus enhances the nervous system's sensory and spatial processing capacity," he says. "That is, the person becomes more aware of her body's movement in space and becomes more aware of tightness or



Massage helps you maintain a healthy body.

keep the immune system strong. In short, massage can keep on working for you, even after the pain is gone.

### MASSAGE FOR WELLNESS

If it's been a while since you booked your last massage--because your pain is no longer an issue or your injury is fully rehabbed--you might want to consider massage for preventive care.

pain long before it reaches a critical point of mechanical dysfunction."

As a preventive measure, frequent massage puts you more in tune with your body. "The consistency of massage therapy over time creates a cumulative stress-reduction effect," Vaughn says.

**Continued on page 2**

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### In this Issue

**What Massage Can Do For You**  
**Happiness is Contagious**  
**MT Straight Talk**

**Continued from page 1**

"The person becomes acutely aware of stress within her body long before it can create stress-driven damage."

And the more massage you receive, the more benefits you reap. "Massage therapists know that people who get massage regularly demonstrate greater improvement and notice a reduction in pain and muscular tension, as well as an improvement in posture," says Anne Williams, author of *Massage Mastery: From Student to Professional* (Lippincott Williams Wilkins, 2012).

"People regularly make a commitment to fitness," Williams says. "People regularly make a commitment to changing their diet. The difference they'd experience if they regularly made a commitment to massage is mind-blowing."

#### STRESS IS A KILLER

Stress is more than just a word we throw around to describe the nature of our hectic day. Today, we understand that stress kills.

According to the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine, 60-90 percent of all US medical visits are for stress-related disorders. Chronic pain, headaches, heart disease, hypertension, and ulcers can all be wrought from stress. Many would argue that the best benefit of massage is its ability to reduce the stress in our lives.

From the perspective of daily living, think about the stress you felt at today's meeting--now it's hiding in your neck. Tomorrow that can turn into stiffness and eventually begin to affect other parts of your body. If you see your massage therapist for your regular session this week, the chances are good you won't reach the tipping point. Think of massage and bodywork as a way to rebalance your body.

Noted researcher Tiffany Field and her colleagues from the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine report that massage causes positive biological changes when it comes to stress. Through the course of more than 20 studies, these scientists found that massage decreases cortisol (a stress-derived hormone that negatively affects immune function and kills our immune cells) and increases dopamine

and serotonin (the neurotransmitters most associated with emotional well-being).

Add to this the research that shows massage can lower your heart rate and decrease your blood pressure, and you have a mighty effective, nonpharmacological, stress-fighting tool that's about as natural as natural can get.

#### A ONE-HOUR VACATION AND SO MUCH MORE

You may no longer need to rehab that knee or work the scar tissue from your surgery, but don't forget about everything else massage can do for you. Massage is the entire package, helping to heal body, mind, and spirit. Think of it as a one-hour vacation with amazing return on investment.

Whether it be maintaining joint

flexibility, managing blood pressure, or enhancing immunity, massage works. From repair to relief and from recovery to relaxation, massage is a magnificent piece of natural medicine you should always have as part of your health-care routine.

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**Regular massage helps reduce stress and improve your quality of life.**

# Happiness is Contagious

Maybe mom was right. Research suggests that surrounding yourself with friends and family who are happy can actually increase your own happiness.

Scientists at Harvard University and the University of California, San Diego, found that emotions, particularly happiness, have a viral effect in how they spread from one person to another. For every happy person in your physical social network, you have a 9 percent chance of increasing your own happiness. The effect is more pronounced the closer someone is to you geographically, and it does not seem to include electronic communications. The study, "Dynamic Spread of Happiness in a Large Social Network," can be found online in the British Medical Journal ([www.bmj.com](http://www.bmj.com)).

This is especially good news considering the potential health benefits of happiness and positivity. A study published in *Stroke* magazine has indicated a "significant association"

between optimism and a reduced risk of stroke. This is in addition to studies that have linked optimism to a healthier immune system, faster wound healing, and a lower risk of heart disease. While the exact cause of the benefits is not clear, one theory is that optimistic people are more likely to take care of their health. In addition, there is hope that teaching optimism could become part of a preventative program for various conditions.

What's one way to get happy? Try massage! Exposure to stress, a contributing factor to unhappiness, over a long period of time can increase the rate of neural degeneration and increase the risk for Alzheimer's disease. Luckily, a study from Umea University in Sweden has shown that just five minutes of massage has the potential to lower stress, and 80 minutes of massage has a tremendously positive effect on stress levels. Get massage, get happy, and cheer up your friends and family!



Surrounding yourself with happy people is healthy!

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## MT Straight Talk

### What Your Massage Therapist Needs to Know

*Angela England*

Most massage therapists guide first-time clients through an intake process that includes discussing health histories and other medical concerns. But talking with your therapist about these things should not end with your first massage. Before each session, take a minute to speak with your therapist about any new medical conditions or injuries, lasting aches and pains, or any other changes in your life. Here are some of the issues your massage therapist should know about.

#### Medical Changes

It's a good idea to regularly update your medical record with your therapist, especially if you've been diagnosed with an illness or medical condition--such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, a chronic autoimmune disease, or skin allergies--or are taking any new medications. Certain medical concerns

preclude you from receiving massage. Other conditions, such as pregnancy, simply change the way your practitioner approaches the session.

#### A New or Acute Injury

Maybe you spent hours driving to a destination getaway and your shoulders ache, or you stepped off the porch wrong and sprained your ankle. Any time you have a new ache, pain, sprain, twist, or pulled muscle, mention it to your therapist. Depending on the location and extent of your injury, the session may need to be postponed or the injury site avoided until more healing has occurred.

#### Personal Preferences

This category is less obvious, but equally important. Everyone has unique

preferences and sometimes there may be something you would like to change for your next massage. Whether you want to bring your own music, have the temperature adjusted, or be draped in an extra blanket, your therapist can easily adapt as long as you communicate your preferences.

Help your practitioner help you. Take a moment to check in with him or her before your next session.

*Angela England enjoys doing massage, gardening, writing, and spending time with her three young children.*

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Frank

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