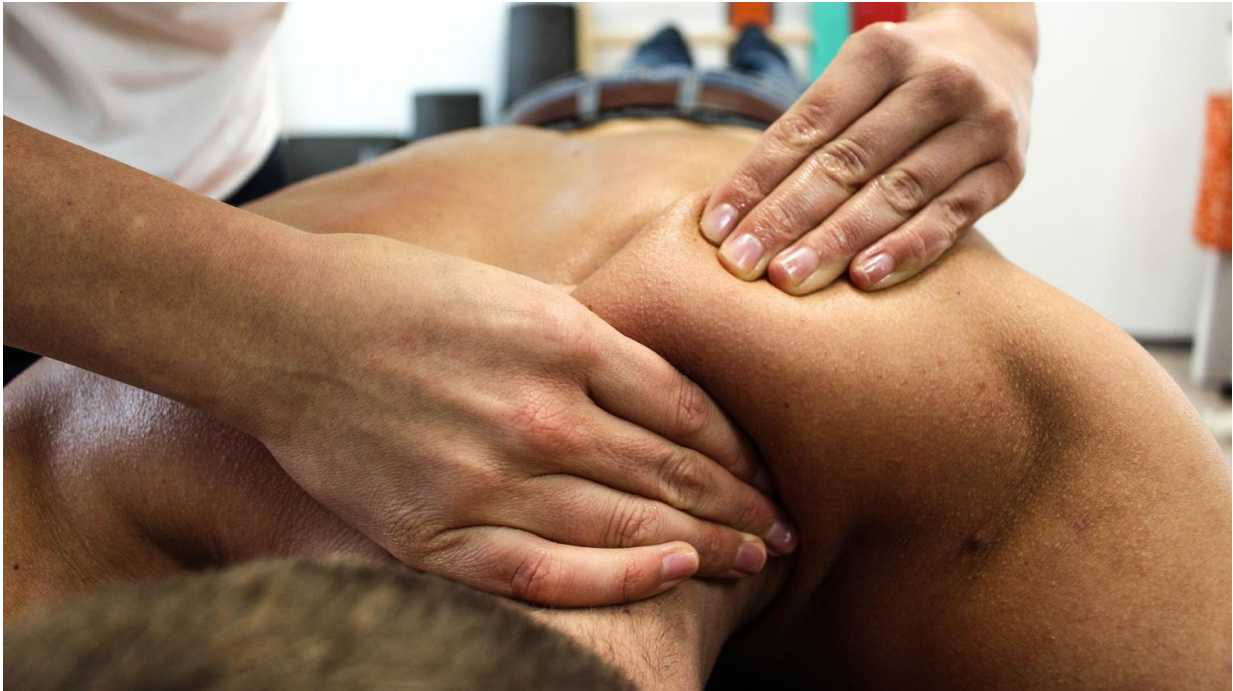


Do massages really work?

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They feel great but do massages really work?

The answer isn't black and white, says a [massage](#) therapist at the University of Alberta.

"The problem is it can be subjective and difficult to measure," said Deborah McIntyre, a member of the [massage therapy](#) team based at the

Glen Sather Sports Medicine Clinic. Massage has a mix of benefits for both mind and body, depending on the varying needs of the client, she said.

"It's specific to what the situation and problem is. It could be massage for a musculoskeletal condition, [pain relief](#), [relaxation therapy](#); the question is, have we fulfilled the client's request for a treatment to address their concerns?"

The key to that, McIntyre added, lies in connecting with four of the body's major physiological systems during massage therapy and "trying to manipulate the soft [tissue](#) to obtain the favourable results the client desires."

The first is the neuromuscular system, which includes all the muscles in the body and the nerves serving them. In this capacity, massage can treat muscles that are either in spasm (too short and tight) or flaccid (too stretched and weak), McIntyre said.

The second part of the body to benefit from a good massage treatment is [connective tissue](#) like ligaments, tendons, cartilage and scar tissue.

"A massage can increase range of motion in a joint or smooth and realign disorganized scar tissue," explained McIntyre.

The [circulatory system](#) also benefits from massage by increasing blood flow to the tissues, which aids in delivering oxygen and getting rid of metabolic waste to promote healing. Used with caution, massage can also help lymphatic drainage for mastectomy patients and stimulate better breathing for people with limited lung capacity or other respiratory conditions. It also improves circulation of cerebral spinal fluid, which could hold potential for treating concussions, McIntyre believes.

Massage also helps the autonomic nervous system, which regulates sympathetic responses in the body like heart rate and arousal.

"A massage helps people come down from heightened stress and anxiety," explained McIntyre.

She added the benefits of massage also linger after the appointment is done.

"The physiological experience definitely has a lasting effect. Massages can't solve everything, but they can be very successful when used appropriately."

More research into measuring the effects of massage on the body's four physiologic systems will further help pinpoint its benefits, she added.

Some studies have shown it also holds potential for people with dementia and Parkinson's disease, she noted, because soft massage can decrease aggressiveness and anxiety.

"We can gain some insight by working with other disciplines in medicine and science such as physiotherapy, sports medicine and chemistry. They have the ability to measure the different molecular structures within blood and tissues, and then we can see if we're making a difference as [massage therapists](#)," she said.

Relaxation versus deep tissue massages

Whether for pure pleasure or to treat pain, there are massage techniques for both. But deep tissue massages should only be given as part of a plan to treat a specific injury, McIntyre said.

"(When) you're dealing with a problem, there should never be a deep

tissue massage without an assessment first. Otherwise the body may not need it and you may damage the tissue. No one wants to feel like they've been hit by a truck after a treatment."

The massage therapist should assess the patient, get their consent and then develop a plan that could also recommend hydrotherapy and other treatments.

"A skilled massage therapist will have many tools to get favourable results without causing further damage."

Relaxation massages are good for treating minor aches and reducing anxiety, McIntyre said.

"It's a softer touch, and you're trying to provide a feeling of well-being as the patient starts to relax."

However, she added, massage treatment may not be appropriate for people with certain conditions that could require first aid or [medical attention](#) due to strokes, diabetic comas, systemic infections, high fevers, or uncontrolled high blood pressure and bleeding.

"A trained therapist will be able to accommodate many other medical conditions and medications and is expected to know when and how to consult with doctors and other health-care professionals," McIntyre noted.

What to expect from a massage therapist

- A pre-massage assessment for a client's injury or condition. A proper case history should be taken, including past and current medical history and a list of prescription medication.
- Development of a treatment plan with the client's informed

consent. A massage therapist should have a good referral base to other medical professionals.

- A variety of massage techniques to provide relief.
- For a relaxation massage, clients should be asked about any medications they're taking and any other contraindications.

Provided by University of Alberta

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