

Massage

Massage therapy is a system of treatment of the soft tissue of the body. It involves stroking, kneading or applying pressure to various parts of the body, with the aim of alleviating aches, pains and musculoskeletal problems (problems relating to the bone and muscle structure of the body, such as headaches and back pain).

What is massage commonly used for?

Massage is used for pain relief, muscular or joint problems such as arthritis or sports injuries, to aid relaxation and for more general health improvement. Research indicates that therapeutic massage may help with stress-related conditions, such as insomnia, irritable bowel syndrome and chronic fatigue, and with constipation and fibromyalgia. It can also be effective for persistent back pain. A guideline for the treatment of multiple sclerosis, issued by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence says that there is some evidence to suggest that massage might be of benefit for people with the condition.

Massage may also be used for people with depression or acute or short-term anxiety. This includes patients in intensive care, psychiatric institutions and hospices. Massage is increasingly being used for pain relief during childbirth and partners can be trained to use massage techniques during labour. Massage can be used to help premature babies achieve more rapid weight gain and development.

What will happen when I see a massage practitioner?

Before carrying out the massage, the practitioner will ask questions about your medical history, diet, lifestyle, and whether you have specific aches, pains or tensions that you are concerned about.

The most common way of giving a massage is on a therapy couch. The patient lies on the couch, usually face down for half the session and face up for the other half. As the practitioner will generally work on most areas of the body you will normally be asked to remove most of your clothes, apart from underwear, and you will be given privacy to do this. The practitioner will cover you and keep you warm with large towels.

The intensity of massage can vary and the practitioner should check that you are happy with the pressure. If you feel uncomfortable for any reason with the massage you should tell the practitioner and you can ask him to stop. No professional practitioner should ever massage the genital area, or touch the patient in a way that is sexual. If this happens you should leave.

What precautions should I take?

Massage is not advisable on the affected areas if you have certain physical complaints such as varicose veins, deep vein thrombosis, bone fractures, swelling, bruising, cuts or infections. It is very important to tell your massage therapist about any physical problems you have, even if you don't think they are relevant to your current health situation.

Massage can be used with pregnant women and babies, but should be carried out by a specially trained practitioner.

People with cancer are advised to see specially trained massage practitioners. Deep massage on any part of the body is not advisable for those with active cancer; massage

should be gentle. If you have cancer the massage therapist should avoid any wounds, recent scars that are still healing, broken skin or infected areas. If you have lymphoedema or a swollen arm, you should not have massage on that arm or shoulder area and if you are having radiotherapy treatment you should not be massaged on the area being treated, although it is safe to have it on other areas of your body.