

Healthy Lifestyle

Stress management

Massage can be a powerful tool to help you take charge of your health and well-being. See if it's right for you.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Massage is no longer available only through luxury spas and upscale health clubs. Today, massage therapy is offered in businesses, clinics, hospitals and even airports. If you've never tried massage, learn about its possible health benefits and what to expect during a massage therapy session.

Massage is a general term for pressing, rubbing and manipulating your skin, muscles, tendons and ligaments. Massage may range from light stroking to deep pressure. There are many different types of massage, including these common types:

- **Swedish massage.** This is a gentle form of massage that uses long strokes, kneading, deep circular movements, vibration and tapping to help relax and energize you.
- **Deep massage.** This massage technique uses slower, more-forceful strokes to target the deeper layers of muscle and connective tissue, commonly to help with muscle damage from injuries.
- **Sports massage.** This is similar to Swedish massage, but it's geared toward people involved in sport activities to help prevent or treat injuries.
- **Trigger point massage.** This massage focuses on areas of tight muscle fibers that can form in your muscles after injuries or overuse.

Massage is generally considered part of complementary and integrative medicine. It's increasingly being offered along with standard treatment for a wide range of medical conditions and situations.

Studies of the benefits of massage demonstrate that it is an effective treatment for reducing stress, pain and muscle tension.

While more research is needed to confirm the benefits of massage, some studies have found massage may also be helpful for:

- Anxiety
- Digestive disorders
- Fibromyalgia
- Headaches
- Insomnia related to stress
- Myofascial pain syndrome
- Soft tissue strains or injuries
- Sports injuries
- Temporomandibular joint pain

Beyond the benefits for specific conditions or diseases, some people enjoy massage because it often produces feelings of caring, comfort and connection.

Despite its benefits, massage isn't meant as a replacement for regular medical care. Let your doctor know you're trying massage and be sure to follow any standard treatment plans you have.

Most people can benefit from massage. However, massage may not be appropriate if you have:

- Bleeding disorders or take blood-thinning medication
- Burns or healing wounds
- Deep vein thrombosis
- Fractures
- Severe osteoporosis
- Severe thrombocytopenia

Discuss the pros and cons of massage with your doctor, especially if you are pregnant or you have cancer or unexplained pain.

Some forms of massage can leave you feeling a bit sore the next day. But massage shouldn't ordinarily be painful or uncomfortable. If any part of your massage doesn't feel right or is painful, speak up right away. Most serious problems come from too much pressure during massage.

You don't need any special preparation for massage. Before a massage therapy session starts, your massage therapist should ask you about any symptoms, your medical history and what you're hoping to get out of massage. Your massage therapist should explain the kind of massage and techniques he or she will use.

In a typical massage therapy session, you undress or wear loose-fitting clothing. Undress only to the point that you're comfortable. You generally lie on a table and cover yourself with a sheet. You can also have a massage while sitting in a chair, fully clothed. Your massage therapist should perform an evaluation through touch to locate painful or tense areas and to determine how much pressure to apply.

Depending on preference, your massage therapist may use oil or lotion to reduce friction on your skin. Tell your massage therapist if you might be allergic to any ingredients.

A massage session may last from 10 to 90 minutes, depending on the type of massage and how much time you have. No matter what kind of massage you choose, you should feel calm and relaxed during and after your massage.

If a massage therapist is pushing too hard, ask for lighter pressure. Occasionally you may have a sensitive spot in a muscle that feels like a knot. It's likely to be uncomfortable while your massage therapist works it out. But if it becomes painful, speak up.

Ask your doctor or someone else you trust for a recommendation. Most states regulate massage therapists through licensing, registration or certification requirements.

Don't be afraid to ask a potential massage therapist such questions as:

- Are you licensed, certified or registered?
- What is your training and experience?
- How many massage therapy sessions do you think I'll need?
- What's the cost, and is it covered by health insurance?

Brush aside any thoughts that massage is only a feel-good way to indulge or pamper yourself. To the contrary, massage can be a powerful tool to help you take charge of your health and well-being, whether you have a specific health condition or are just looking for another stress reliever. You can even learn how to do self-massage or how to engage in massage with a partner at home.

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