

Massage

Massage involves a therapist manipulating the soft tissues of the body. Traditionally it has been used to aid wellbeing, relaxation and general health.

People with cancer who have had massage have said they found it relaxing and it gave them a sense of relief. Research suggests that it may help to reduce pain, depression and anxiety.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care supports massage as a safe and beneficial therapy for those with cancer when practised by a therapist with appropriate experience and/or training.



Helping you live well.

Information on massage

This evidence based information sheet aims to provide clearly sourced and reliable information to help you make informed choices about massage, one of a range of complementary therapies available to support people with cancer. If you would like more information on how to access the range of services Penny Brohn Cancer Care provides, please contact our Helpline on 0845 123 23 10. We are able to provide our services free of charge, thanks to the charitable donations and voluntary contributions which fund our work.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care opinion

| We support this therapy and include it as part of the Penny Brohn Whole Person Approach | We support this therapy, but do not offer it as part of the Penny Brohn Whole Person Approach | We do not support this therapy |
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Practitioner perspective

“Our experience has shown us that regular massage can lead to improved physical and emotional confidence. It can also help people to express their emotions and experience a renewed sense of hope.

Massage can help people to find a greater acceptance of their physical and emotional circumstances. It may reduce the sense of isolation that some people experience.

Massage can be powerful in restoring a sense of wholeness and balance. It can provide a space for fresh insight and help people to let go of fear.”



More information: What is massage?

Massage is an ancient practice. There are references to its use as far back as 2700BC in China. Records suggest it was also used in Japanese, Arabic, Egyptian, Indian, Persian, Greek and Roman cultures¹. Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine, described the use of massage techniques for a wide range of conditions from sprains to constipation.

Modern massage involves the manipulation of muscles and soft tissues to aid health, wellbeing, circulation and relaxation. The level of touch used can be light and gentle or deep and quite strong. Massage in Europe has developed into many different practices which draw on various traditions, most commonly on Swedish massage techniques. Massage does not include practices that involve manipulation of the skeletal system such as osteopathy and chiropractics. Therapists often use a combination of techniques. Some of the common techniques include:

- **Swedish or classical massage** – uses five basic techniques: vibration, tapping, kneading, stroking and friction
- **Holistic massage** – takes into account the whole person, mind, body and spirit
- **Aromatherapy massage** – uses aromatherapy oils to add to the effects of the massage
- **Sports massage** – to help athletes prevent or heal injuries
- **Deep tissue massage** – this reaches beyond the superficial layer of muscles to the muscles underneath

What happens in a massage session?

- A session can last from 15 minutes to an hour. Shorter sessions are used when a specific area such as the shoulders or feet are to be treated. A full body massage requires longer.
- Massage may be given when lying on a massage table or when seated on a chair. This will depend on the area to be treated. Music might be played during the session. Most types of massage require direct contact with the skin, so the removal of some clothing is essential. The therapist will give the client privacy to do this. Massage therapists often use towels or sheets to cover parts of the body they are not treating.
- Oil or lotion can be used to lubricate the massage and prevent discomfort from friction. The types of techniques used can vary from light, smooth and gentle to deep and vigorous. Techniques include long strokes, kneading, quick tapping, friction, stretching and pressure on specific points. The therapist may use their forearms and elbows and even specially designed massage tools as well as their hands.

What are the providers' claims?

(Please note that these are not the claims of Penny Brohn Cancer Care)

Massage does not claim to be a cure for cancer. It is given to help with some of its side effects. Massage is given for muscular and joint problems as well as pain relief. It is also thought to reduce stress and anxiety, and help you to feel more relaxed. Practitioners believe that it can help your general health and boost your wellbeing.

What do people who have tried massage say about it?

Research studies known as qualitative studies ask people about their experiences. They can tell us what having a therapy was like for the people involved in the study, but can't tell us if a therapy is likely to work for everyone (this is dealt with in the section "What's the evidence?").

People who had massage described positive experiences. These included relief from suffering, a sense of strength, empowerment and a sense of being special³.

People also said they appreciated the distraction from a frightening experience when it was given whilst receiving chemotherapy. They found it helped them to think more positively, was relaxing, and 'felt good'⁴. Massage reduced discomfort, helped people to sleep better and feel more at ease with changes to their body. People also enjoyed the sense of support^{5,6}.



Is massage safe?

It is considered safe to have gentle massage on areas that have not been affected by cancer. It should be practised by a therapist who has appropriate experience or training. Deep massage is not appropriate for areas affected by active cancer or people with low platelet counts^{2,7,8}. If you are undergoing treatment for cancer, choose a massage therapist who is experienced at working with people with cancer. Areas of broken skin, infections and areas where you have had recent surgery should be avoided^{9,10}.

How much does it cost?

Massage therapy can cost between £20 and £60 for an hour session. You may wish to speak to the therapist about their experience of working with cancer patients. Penny Brohn Cancer Care offers massage free of charge.

Are there any legal issues?

There is no legal regulation of massage therapists in the UK at present. Most therapists are well trained and are part of one of a number of professional associations. The General Council for Massage Therapy is promoting the self-regulation of massage therapists.

What is the evidence on massage?

Three reviews of research found that massage may have a beneficial effect on cancer-related pain, depression and anxiety¹¹⁻¹³. However another review did not find these effects¹⁴. Other benefits of massage included a reduction in nausea¹¹, anger^{11,14}, stress¹¹ and fatigue^{11,14}.

This is a summary of research findings. A full list of references and an extended summary of the research literature is available upon request from our Helpline.

Other sources of information

| Organisations that offer support and information for people with cancer | More information on complementary therapies | Organisations that represent massage |
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| Cancer Research UK Tel: 0808 800 4040 www.cancerresearchuk.org | NHS Evidence www.evidence.nhs.uk | General Council for Massage Therapy Tel: 0870 850 4452 www.gcmt.org.uk |
| Macmillan Cancer Support Tel: 0808 808 0000 www.macmillan.org.uk | CAMLIS www.cam.nhs.uk | Complementary and Natural Healthcare Council Tel: 020 3178 2199 www.cnhc.org.uk |
| NHS Direct Tel: 111 www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk | | |

Contact us:

Helpline **0845 123 23 10** (Weekdays 9.30am to 5.00pm, 24-hour answerphone)

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Statement

Our information and research is designed to help you make informed choices about the services that we provide. From time to time, for illustrative purposes, we may make reference to commonly available products (such as relaxation CDs and popular self-help books). We do not endorse or advertise the use of any specific product.

Disclaimer:

While we make every effort to use up-to-date and reliable sources, we cannot accept liability for errors in the sources that we use and also cannot guarantee to find all the information relevant to your enquiry or request. All responsibility for interpretation of and action upon that information rests with you. This information and advice is offered on the understanding that if you intend to support your treatment with complementary or alternative approaches then it is advisable to consult your medical team to ensure that they have a complete understanding of your situation and the complementary or alternative approach that you are considering.

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Extra information to support: “What is the evidence on massage?”

Qualitative research

People who have had massage describe many positive experiences. These have been reported in a small number of qualitative research studies.

One study of fair quality shows that people report experiencing relief from suffering, a moment of “getting away”, a sense of strength, being special and empowerment³.

In another study of similar quality, people describe the welcome distraction from a frightening experience when massage was given whilst receiving chemotherapy⁴. They found it helped them turn from negative to positive thoughts, was relaxing, and “felt good”⁴.

People in another study reported benefits such as relaxation, reduced discomfort in their arms, better sleep and being more at ease with an altered body. They welcomed the opportunity to talk openly about negative feelings and to be supported emotionally and physically⁵. It was difficult to tell if this study was of good quality as not enough information was given.

Finally, a massage therapist reported on the feedback she got from her clients. They described a number of comfort benefits, some of which were derived from the chance to discuss matters with the therapist⁶. This study was also poorly described and so its quality cannot be assessed.

Quantitative research

Four reviews¹¹⁻¹⁴ looked at the effect of massage on symptoms of cancer and its treatment. Two of these studied Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) of patients with breast cancer^{13,14}, another looked at RCTs of palliative patients with various cancers¹¹ and the fourth looked at RCTs as well as other types of studies of palliative patients with various cancers¹².

Three of the reviews¹¹⁻¹³ concluded that massage can help with cancer-related pain, depression and anxiety. However, another review did not find significant results for these outcomes¹⁴. Beneficial effects of massage were also reported for nausea¹¹, anger^{11,14}, stress¹¹, and fatigue^{11,14}. Quality of life was found to be significantly improved in two of the reviews,^{11,13} however it was not found to be improved in a third review¹⁴.

Other RCTs not included in the reviews also show some favourable results for massage. One study¹⁵ of patients with secondary cancer in the bone found that there was an improvement in mood, increased muscle relaxation (up to 18 hours after the intervention) and reduced pain following three sessions of massage. There was a beneficial effect on sleep by the end of the intervention for individual patients but there was no difference in quality of sleep between the control group and those receiving massage.

A study¹⁶ of breast cancer patients showed that patients had a short term reduction in stress and cortisol (a hormone relating to stress) and that mood states improved. There were some issues relating to the quality of these studies however so the results have to be treated with caution.

A randomized controlled trial which looked at the effect of massage on immune function and stress in women with breast cancer¹⁷ showed that massage decreased the deterioration of natural killer cell activity during radiation therapy.

Another small study of people with metastatic cancer found that massage significantly improved peoples’ wellbeing for up to a month. They did not find significant improvements in pain, anxiety and alertness as a result of massage¹⁸.

This is a reference list of sources of information used to prepare Penny Brohn Cancer Care's evidence-based information sheet.

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