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Massage Therapy: Your Immune System May Knead It

Julia E. Reid

Finally - a reason to treat yourself to a massage, guilt-free. As massage therapy goes mainstream, medical researchers are uncovering more and more health benefits to lying down on the table. Because of these compelling benefits, it is time to consider massage therapy not as a luxury indulgence but as a form of medical treatment.

Massage therapy dates back to the second century B.C., when it was used in China and soon after, in India and Egypt. More recently, it was practiced in the United States as a form of healing up until the pharmaceutical revolution of the 1940s.¹ Since then, it has not been considered a primary treatment for ailments but reclassified as alternative medicine. The surge of interest in massage therapy over the past thirty years, however, is earning it the mainstream acceptance it deserves. Would-be massage therapy clients have reason to be interested: recent studies have found massage therapy to enhance immune function both physically and psychologically.

One physical effect of massage therapy is an increase in circulation. The short, rhythmical strokes of a massage can increase lymph circulation in the body, which leads to a greater distribution of neutrophils and lymphocytes. The more even distribution of white blood cells that results decreases susceptibility to antigens.² Massage therapy has also been shown to reduce inflammation³ and edema.⁴ These physical changes contribute to the body's immune-enhancing ability.

It doesn't take a clinical researcher to understand that a massage is calming, but scientists have discovered why it is so. Psychologically, massage therapy boosts the body's immune function by reducing stress and inducing a sense of relaxation. Emotional stress is destructive in suppressing cellular immunity and provoking inflammatory immune responses. When the body is under emotional or physiological stress, it produces increased levels of epinephrine, norepinephrine and neuropeptide Y. These sympathetic hormones suppress natural killer (NK) cell function, thereby inducing a less than ideal pro-inflammatory state.⁵ As for massage therapy, it has been repeatedly shown to decrease stress levels, as evidenced by decreased levels of cortisol (salivary and urinary), epinephrine and norepinephrine,¹ and to lower systolic and diastolic blood pressure, mean arterial pressure and heart rate.⁶ These changes were borne out by the results of one study in which breast cancer patients who received massage therapy for five weeks experienced an 11 percent increase in the number of NK cells as compared to the control group, which showed no statistically significant change.¹ Similar results have been found in healthy, cancer-free subjects.⁷

The immunological effects of massage offer therapeutic benefits to patients suffering from a wide range of diseases. Massage therapy has been used to treat patients with depression, anxiety, asthma, hypertension, HIV, chronic venous insufficiency and arthritis, and currently, is routinely included in the treatment plan for cancer patients at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston and the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City.^{3,4,5,6,8} These early-adopting institutions are a good start, but patients elsewhere, too, should have access to massage therapy as a component of their treatment regimen. Other medical centers across the country must overcome their preconceptions and begin to adopt this treatment. If they do, hopefully,

massage therapy may finally be accepted as a complementary - not an alternative - form of medical treatment.

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