



# What You “Knead” to Know About Massage

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artha Armstrong credits massage therapy for helping her live with the daily pain of fibromyalgia and other chronic pain conditions. “Massage is one reason I’m still able to be independent,” says Armstrong, a resident of Fargo, N.D. “My quality of life is much better because I get massages.”

The American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) estimates that Americans visit massage therapists 75 million times each year and spend \$2 – \$4 billion on massage annually. The estimated 160,000 U.S. massage therapists treat sports injuries and repetitive stress injuries. They also help their clients ease tension, anxiety, depression, insomnia, stress, back pain, headache, muscle pain and chronic pain.

## Experience the healing touch

Massage is a healing art and science that uses touch to manipulate the body’s soft tissue. There are several types of massage, including Swedish, Shiatsu, Acupressure and Deep Tissue. Most people are familiar with Swedish massage, which uses long strokes, kneading and friction techniques on the more superficial layers of muscles.

Massage increases the blood and lymph flow, soothing the central nervous system and increasing oxygen in the blood. It also increases endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers.

The emotional benefits include a sense of well-being and relaxation. Touch is healing for people of all ages. Massage can facilitate weight gain and positive sleep patterns in preterm infants and increase peak airflow and improve pulmonary function in asthmatic children. One study conducted by the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami on pregnancy massage showed decreased anxiety and stress during pregnancy and fewer obstetric and postnatal complications. Many people who are “touch deprived,” such as those who are divorced or widowed, or those who are experiencing grief, can experience healing touch through massage.

## Increase your body awareness

Ron Venk, a licensed massage therapist in New York City, links the recent interest in massage to the increased awareness of the importance of exercise and relaxation. “My clients come in for massage for much-needed relaxation of mind and body, and for healing their aches and pains. After a session, they’re better able to recover from pain related to tension, work stress or injury,” he says.





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Steve Olson, president of the AMTA, believes that massage therapy increases our awareness of what's going on in our body and helps us discover what causes our pain or discomfort. For example, you may learn that you need to be more careful when you sit at the computer for long periods of time, or that you need to buy a new mattress or practice better posture. "Massage helps us become more aware of our bodies. This may assist us in changing the behaviors that result in muscular aches and pains," says Olson.

Massage can benefit most everyone. But there are several health conditions a qualified massage therapist should be aware of before providing a massage, says Olson. They include tuberculosis, arthritis, skin infections, circulatory ailments, surgery, diabetes, phlebitis and some forms of cancer. A therapist will consider these conditions in determining a safe massage approach. If you are pregnant, be sure to alert your therapist.

### Prepare for a relaxing experience

A table massage usually lasts an hour. The therapist will ask about your medical history and current physical condition. You'll be asked to remove as much clothing as you are comfortable with, cover yourself with a sheet or towel, and rest on a padded massage table, after the therapist has left the room. During the massage, the therapist will uncover only the part of your body that is being worked on. The therapist will work on one part of your body at a time — including your head, neck, shoulders, arms, hands, back, legs and feet.

The therapist will use oil, unless you have an allergic reaction to it. Some therapists play music or light candles during the session. It's best to discuss your preferences with your therapist — for example, whether you'd like to talk during the session or be worked on in silence. Be sure to discuss any concerns with the practitioner, and let her know if anything she does causes pain, if you are cold, or if you are uncomfortable with anything.

### Find a massage therapist

The AMTA has established standards that have been incorporated into many state licensing laws. Thirty states and Washington, D.C., currently have legislation regarding the licensing of massage therapists. Make sure your massage therapist is licensed and that she has been trained at a school whose curriculum meets the standards set by the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation. You can also ask the therapist whether he or she is certified by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork.

Finding a compatible massage therapist is like shopping for any other health practitioner. Keep looking until you find a therapist you feel you can communicate with. Ask your friends and your doctor for a recommendation. You should expect an hour-long massage to cost around \$60. Many insurance companies pay for massages. +

## Massage Your Children

With a little practice, parents can learn to massage their children. Follow these tips from Maria Hernandez-Reif, a developmental psychologist at the University of Miami Medical School's department of pediatrics and a researcher at the Touch Research Institute:

- Remove jewelry and wash your hands.
- Find a quiet, safe area. For small children, use a towel or mat on the floor. For older children, do the massage on the child's bed as a nighttime ritual.
- Allow at least a half hour after a meal to do the massage.
- A child massage takes 15 - 20 minutes. To focus, turn off the television and turn on the answering machine.
- Use a small bit of oil on your palm to help with gliding strokes.
- Pay attention to your child's cues to make sure the pressure is not too light (which may tickle) or too hard (which may be painful).
- Never apply direct pressure to joints (shoulders, elbows, knees) or spine.
- Apply lighter pressure to the chest, as children's rib cages are sensitive.

Here are some massage techniques to try:

- With child lying face up, pretend to shampoo the hair, using fingertips to make small circles all around the head.
- Use the flats of your hands to stroke your child's back. Start at the top center of the back and stroke outward, going from the top of the back to the bottom.
- Gently pull each toe of the foot. Massage the bottom of the foot, using your thumbs to make little circles from the heel to the toes. Massage the top of the foot, including the ankle.

## For More Information

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The Touch Research Institute  
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AMTA's "Find a Massage Therapist"  
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