Can Massage Therapy Help Treat Lower Back Pain?

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Massage Therapy for Back Pain

The thing with lower back pain is it's easily misdiagnosed. Cases of back pain vary in span and origin – some are caused by an underlying medical condition while others can't be explained.

In other words, lower back pain is an unconventional disorder that often requires an alternative approach. Enter massage therapy for back pain.

What used to be just a spa service to help us unwind is now recommended by the American College of Physicians as one of the best non-pharmacologic methods to relieve lower back pain.

However, how can a simple tissue manipulation help ward off acute or chronic back pain? Is massage all it's cracked up to be or just another overrated therapy?

Let's start uncovering the facts about massage therapy for back pain.

Massage Therapy for Lower Back Pain: What Does the Research Say?

In 2013, a group of researchers set out to unravel the mystery of nonspecific lower back pain.

They wanted to know what effect massage has on this type of lower back pain. Out of several studies they found, only nine systematic reviews passed their criteria.

Published in the *International Journal of General Medicine*, their findings led to a conclusion that massage is effective in treating lower back pain compared to active treatment options and placebo, albeit only for the short-term.

The Cochrane systematic review on massage as lower back pain treatment likewise drew the same conclusion: Massage therapy provides short-term improvements for both subacute and chronic lower back pain.

Both studies suggest that massage can effectively relieve lower back pain but how long the massage benefits will last is still subject to scrutiny.

However, just how useful it is compared to conventional treatments like pain medications?

Additional Studies on Using Massage Therapy for Lower Back Pain

A 2014 study published in the *Scientific World Journal*, 59 participants suffering from chronic low back pain caused by various spinal conditions were divided into two groups. One group received massage therapy while the other a combination of massage and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.

Both groups reported a significant pain reduction and improvement in function. The result suggests massage is safer yet just as powerful as over-the-counter pain medications in fending off the lower back pain.

Another study published in the journal, *Pain Medicine*, also puts massage in a favorable light.

A total of 104 individuals complaining of chronic back pain were referred to licensed therapists to receive ten sessions of massage for 12 weeks. The back massages were customized to meet each individual's unique needs.

At the end of the study, more than half of the participants reported significant improvements in pain and function. Their conditions significantly improved, so much so that their scores “dropped below the threshold for disability” on a standardized screening test.

How Massage Therapy Works in Relieving Lower Back Pain?

The science behind how massage works on back pain is as tricky as explaining why back pain forms in the first place.

There are different types of massage. Each one varies regarding frequency, duration, and amount of pressure applied. Hence, various types of massage can lead to different results.

Concerning relieving pain, researchers at Canada’s McMaster University are in consensus on how massage operates. In a study published in *Science Translational Medicine*, they said that massage could directly reduce muscle inflammation and in so doing curb the pain.

Involving 11 men who were asked to ride a stationary bike to the point of exhaustion before receiving massage, the study discovered the link between tissue manipulation and particular genes.

These genes, when activated by massage, can decrease muscle pain and inflammation – the effect similar to what happens to your body when you take aspirin or other pain medications.

What Is the Best Type of Massage for Back Pain?

Massage comes in different forms.

From the invigorating-but-sometimes-painful Thai massage to the relaxing Swedish, there is always a massage that can perfectly suit your needs.

If you’re getting a massage from a therapist, the decision will be based on both your preference and what the therapist deems appropriate to your condition.

There are two basic types of massage:

- Relaxation involves strokes that are intended to induce a deep sense of relaxation (think Swedish)
- Structural is comprised of massage techniques that release tension or tight knots from your soft tissues.

A study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* looked into the effects of relaxation and structural massage on lower back pain compared to usual care. It involved over 400 patients suffering from chronic lower back pain with no identified cause.

The participants were assigned to three groups: the first two received structural and relaxation massage, respectively, while those in the last group were given traditional treatments.

Both massage groups reported more significant improvements in symptoms and function compared to the usual care group. At ten weeks, participants who received back massages “were better able to perform daily activities, were more active, spent fewer days in bed, and used less anti-inflammatory medication.”

The massage benefits lasted for six months. At one year, the changes in pain and function seemed to have leveled off across all groups.

Most importantly, there’s no marked difference between the effects of structural and that of relaxation massage. As long as your therapist knows how to listen to your body and apply the right techniques suitable to your condition, any massage can work well with lower back pain.

The Bottom Line...

We need more research to fully understand which massage can help those who suffer from lower back pain . Since massage therapy comes with little or no side-effects, it won’t harm to give it a try.

Existing evidence suggests that physicians should look into massage and its potential benefits, incorporating it into treatment programs as part of a more holistic approach.

However, not all health insurance plans cover massage therapy. This is why more evidence is needed to help patients weigh the benefits of massage with its cost.

Ideally, you should find a licensed massage therapist. One way to save cost is to contact massage schools that offer low-cost massage services. Alternatively, you can also buy one of those affordable hand-held massagers that can help relieve lower back pain anytime and anywhere.

Regardless of massage you get, it’s crucial to talk to your healthcare provider first to identify if there’s any restriction on what type of massage you can receive.

Massage therapy for back pain only complements traditional treatments and is not the be-all and end-all of lower back pain relief.