

Five Surprising Benefits of Massage

We know a massage feels good, but it can have a host of therapeutic advantages, too.

The newest cure-all may be an ancient one: simple touch. The Chinese have been using massage for all kinds of medical conditions for centuries. Now, Western research is confirming that massage isn't just for muscle pain. One of the most surprising findings: massage may help premature babies gain weight. When Tiffany Field, a professor of pediatrics, became a new mother, she massaged her premature infant daughter and was so impressed with the results she later founded the Touch Research Institute (TRI) at the University of Miami School of Medicine. Massage, it turns out, may boost immunity and help people with a range of conditions from premenstrual syndrome to high blood pressure. It also seems to help soothe pain from arthritis, burns and even surgery. Here are five surprising facts about massage from the research findings at TRI and elsewhere that you can put to use:

1. Pick Your Spot: You don't have to massage the part of the body that hurts most. If you're shy about letting a friend touch your aching lower back, for instance, she could help by massaging your shoulders instead. This is because massage creates chemical changes that reduce pain and stress throughout the body. One way it does this is by reducing a brain chemical called substance P that is related to pain. In a TRI study, for example, individuals with a form of muscle pain called fibromyalgia showed less substance P in their saliva (and they reported reduced pain) after a month of twice-weekly massages.

2. De-Stress, Stay Healthy. Massage may boost immunity. Several studies have measured the stress hormone called cortisol in subjects' saliva before and after massage sessions, and found dramatic decreases. Cortisol, which is produced when you are stressed, kills cells important for immunity, so when massage reduces your stress levels and hence the cortisol in your body, it may help you avoid getting a cold or another illness while under stress.

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3. Blood Pressure Benefits:

4. Technique Tactics: There's little evidence to support one kind of massage over another, says Field, so don't worry about whether your therapist is schooled in Shiatsu, Swedish or some other technique. The key is pressure firm enough to make a temporary indentation in the skin. If you try massage with a partner, use massage oil, which you can find in a health-food store or pharmacist, but test a little on your skin first to make sure you are not allergic.

5. Self Help. You can massage yourself. Although you don't have to massage the part of the body that hurts to relieve pain, targeting that area does tend to help more. One example is massaging the arms. If you're in danger of developing inflamed nerves in your hands or arms from repetitive movements (like typing on a keyboard, or even gripping a steering wheel for hours at a time) try massaging your arms for 15 minutes a day. Stroke from the wrist to the elbow and back down on both sides of the forearm.

Massage reduces hypertension, suggests a good deal of research. This may be because it stimulates pressure receptors that prompt action from the vagus nerve, one of the nerves that emerges from the brain. The vagus nerve regulates blood pressure, as well as other functions. In a 2005 study at the University of South Florida, hypertension patients who received 10 massages of 10 minutes each over three weeks showed significant improvements in blood pressure compared to a control group who simply rested in the same environment without any massage.