

Benefits of Massage for Arthritis

Whether you prefer to have a massage in a spa or aromatherapy-type venue, or in a treatment room at a physical therapy clinic, the increasing popularity must be due to the benefits found in people seeking to soothe sore joints and muscles, ease stress and anxiety, and improve sleep.

Massage offers benefits for general health and medical reasons such as pain management, stiffness and surgery or injury rehabilitation. Massage can affect the body's production of certain hormones linked to blood pressure, anxiety, heart rate and other vital signs. But is massage safe and effective for people with arthritis?

Although most research on massage examines its effects on the general population, a number of recent studies have shown that it is useful for people with arthritis and related conditions. The studies show the following key benefits.

- Regular, weekly massage can reduce pain and improve joint mobility of the knee.
- Massage to arthritic hands can reduce pain and anxiety, and improve grip strength.
- In patients with fibromyalgia, regular weekly massage proved to significantly reduce pain, anxiety and depression.
- Chronic low back and neck pain can be managed with relaxation massage or more structured physical therapy massage. Massage can result in less pain, and improved performance of daily activities. Likewise deep tissue massage can relieve chronic back pain.

HOW DOES MASSAGE WORK?

You may be wondering how massage can reduce pain and anxiety for people with arthritis?

Massage lowers the body's production of the stress hormone cortisol and decrease levels of the hormone arginine vasopressin. Together this can result in lowered blood pressure and reduced levels of inflammatory agents, which brings a sense of calm and pain relief. At the same time as reducing stress hormones, massage can increase the production of the happy, feel-good hormone serotonin. These mood-boosting hormones feed into your mental health status – reducing feelings of anxiety, stress and depression and help build feeling enabling better coping strategies. Likewise, the relaxation induced by massage may enable a better night's sleep which, in turn, will reduce stress and possibly pain levels. Or, maybe the reduced anxiety produced by massage resulted in a better night's sleep. The exact scientific mechanism that comes into play is not fully understood as yet. However, science has shown that the pressure exerted by the hands during massage stimulates pressure receptors

– nerves under the skin that convey pain-reducing signals to the brain. Also, the friction, movement and manipulation of the skin and underlying muscle tissue increases blood circulation to the area. The increased blood flow brings with it oxygen and nutrients that may help reduce muscle spasm, while flushing out toxins from the area. Manual manipulation of the tissue may help to stretch tight structures or muscles that are in spasm, which can reduce pain and improve tissue and joint mobility.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR BEFORE YOU TRY MASSAGE

If you're interested in trying one of the many types of massage as a way to ease your arthritis (both physical and mental) symptoms, consult your rheumatologist, primary-care physician or physical therapist first to ensure that massage is safe for you. Some massage techniques may involve strong pressure to sensitive tissues and joints, or moving limbs into various positions that may be difficult depending on your arthritis.

Use caution when considering massage if you have:

- damaged or eroded joints from arthritis;
- flare of inflammation, fever or a skin rash;
- severe osteoporosis (brittle bones);
- high blood pressure; or
- varicose veins.

It is important to give your massage therapist feedback during a treatment as well as the day or two following a massage. This will help gauge the benefit, determine if your arthritis is made worse during or after treatment, which will allow for adjustments in techniques and timing/pressure/duration of treatment for the future.

Massage should help alleviate your arthritis symptoms, not make it worse. Tweaking a treatment may be needed as each person is different. Remember, massage therapy cannot cure your arthritis and is not 'medicine' in that sense. It should be used in along with any pharmacological treatment prescribed, as well as other management therapies including exercise therapy.

The information contained in this article is intended as general guidance and information only and should not be relied upon as a basis for planning individual medical care or as a substitute for specialist medical advice in each individual case. ©Co-Kinetic 2024