

In Knead of a Massage?

By Rachel Larrivee

When you are choosing a type of massage therapy, the myriad choices available can seem overwhelming. In narrowing down your options, it's important to decide what's prompting you to seek massage therapy in the first place. It could be that you are having trouble sleeping or relaxing in general, you may be suffering from pain and someone suggested a massage may help, or maybe massage is just something you've heard about and are curious to try. Whatever the reason, massage therapy is a safe and effective way to heal your body and quiet your mind.

Swedish Massage

If you are new to massage or don't go very often, this is a great massage to start with. A Swedish massage involves using lotion or oil to execute long, flowing strokes, with the therapist trying to keep one or both hands on the body as much as possible. It may also include circular pressure on "knots" (adhesions in the muscles), percussion-like tapping, and gentle stretching. A Swedish massage is usually intended to be deeply relaxing and can help decrease minor aches and pains. Short-term effects include decreased stress, anxiety and muscular tension. Over time, regular massages will break down scar tissue and improve one's range of motion. Chronic conditions may require ongoing massage therapy.

Deep Tissue Massage

The goal of a deep tissue massage is to break a pain cycle and aid in the healing process of a soft tissue injury. The main difference between Swedish massage and this massage therapy is that deep tissue is regional, with a focus on one or two specific areas of the body. Swedish massage techniques are used first, to relax the muscle and allow the therapist to reach the deeper layers of tissue without causing pain or further injury. Little to no lubricant is used in this case, and the work is deliberate and slow. Deep tissue massage is an excellent complement to physical therapy, orthopedics and chiropractic care. Again, it's not a quick fix and although one deep tissue massage will feel great, it will take more than a session or two to have lasting results.

Often deep tissue is perceived as being a really painful therapy. There can be the occasional discomfort (especially when working on an injury) but a therapist trained in deep tissue will have the skills necessary to implement it safely and effectively. Good communication between the client and therapist is hugely important here. It's necessary to keep your therapist informed of changes in health and medications. Some medications such as muscle relaxers can make a deep tissue session potentially dangerous, and even cause tearing and other damage. If you are in a great deal of pain, a deep tissue massage may be too aggressive.

Neuromuscular Massage

Neuromuscular massage also aims to treat chronic pain patterns. Like a deep tissue massage, it focuses on a particular area and uses precise techniques. While the slow strokes and deep finger pressure of a deep tissue session are perfect for old injuries, a neuromuscular massage is more effective for inflamed and more recently damaged tissue. A therapist trained in neuromuscular therapies can locate “trigger points” (tender muscle points) and use gentle methods to remove them.

Stone Massage

Another effective method of pain relief is using hot or cold therapy and a particularly effective way to implement this is through stone massage. A stone massage uses hot or cold stones combined with Swedish and deep tissue techniques. A cold stone is usually made from marble and used to treat inflammation and swelling. They can also work to numb the area of discomfort, causing a natural analgesic (painkiller) effect. A hot stone is typically made of basalt, which is rich in iron and helps retain heat. Hot stones are effective in loosening tight muscles.

Every stone massage therapist has a different method of working with the stones, but they are generally used in two ways. One is to place the stone directly on one spot (often a sheet or towel is used as a barrier between the rock and skin) and leave it for several minutes while massage is rendered elsewhere. Sometimes several stones are laid out over a muscle group at a time, which has a pleasant and relaxing effect. The other way to use a stone is as a massage tool, with the therapist holding it in his or her hand.

One important aspect of stone massage and all of the therapies described here is the issue of nudity. While this topic often causes anxiety and confusion, it’s important to know that your therapist is never going to actually see you naked. After your initial intake, the massage therapist will leave the room and give you time to undress and get under the sheets. While it’s important to only remove as much clothing as you feel comfortable with, remember that garments such as shorts and bras can prevent the therapist from being able to get to areas you may want work on. Rest assured that your therapist will only expose the area he or she is working on. However, not all types of massage require disrobing.

Chair Massage

Chair massage, also known as on-site massage, is a style of massage practiced over one’s clothes. While essentially still considered a Swedish or deep tissue massage, chair massage is worth noting due to its uniqueness. The therapist uses a special type of ergonomic massage chair that is portable, making it easy to transport to health fairs, trade shows and sports events. Some companies even hire massage therapists to come into the work place and provide employee chair massages. While a short (10- to 20-minute) session is typical, it is possible to do a full-body session on a massage chair. A chair massage may be a good place to start if you are looking for a therapist to work with regularly, as an inexpensive way to try one out.

Regardless of whether you receive massage regularly or once in a while, the benefits are numerous. Trying different types of massage can be fun and interesting. Remember that a massage is not about “fixing” yourself; it’s intended to enhance your health and complement other healthy habits such as working out and eating right. Massage therapists love to talk about their craft, and asking one for information is the first step to figuring out the right kind of therapy for you.

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