

Beyond Lovemaking: The Many Benefits Of Whole-Body Massage

By Michael Castleman

Sex experts agree that leisurely, playful, whole-body caresses are the sensual foundation of fulfilling lovemaking. The entire body is a sensual playground. Mutual massage excites the skin, the nervous system, and the mind, setting the stage for great erotic fun.

But there's more to massage than just great sex. Massage has become recognized as a highly therapeutic treatment for many conditions, among them: pain, stress, anxiety, and depression. These conditions are extremely common. They also interfere with sexual enjoyment. The research shows that by incorporating whole-body massage into lovemaking, you do more than enhance sex. You also contribute to each other's well-being, which increases mutual comfort, deepens intimacy—and makes sex feel more fulfilling.

The Many Benefits of Massage

Massage has been used therapeutically since ancient times. Hippocrates, the father of Western medicine, is reputed to have said, “The physician must be experienced in many things, but most assuredly, in rubbing.” But modern research into massage dates from the mid-1980s, when a study by University of Miami (FL) psychologist Tiffany Field, Ph.D., examined the effects of daily massages on premature infants in a neonatal intensive care unit. Compared with premies who were not massaged, those who were grew faster, were healthier, and left the hospital sooner. Field went on to establish the Touch Research Institute. She and her colleagues have conducted a great deal of research showing how beneficial massage can be.

Pain Relief

Massage is particularly helpful in treating pain. Pain, of course, can be a major impediment to good sex, so cultivating a massage approach to sex can enhance lovemaking by reducing pain.

Massage relieves pain in two ways. First, according to Dr. Field, it increases blood levels of endorphins, the body's own pain-relievers. In addition, massage is relaxing, so it helps treat all stress-related conditions, among them, pain problems. Pain is stressful, and the muscular tension engendered by stress and anxiety exacerbate pain. The result is often a vicious cycle: pain, stress, greater pain, more stress, more pain. Massage (and other relaxation therapies) help break this cycle and provide at least partial pain relief.

In a study at the University of South Carolina, researchers gave 28 hospitalized cancer patients standard psychological tests to assess their pain. Then some received a 10-minute visit, the others a 10-minute massage. The massage group enjoyed significantly greater pain relief.

In Seattle, University of Washington researchers worked with 262 people with low-back pain. They received one of three treatments: self-care (a book and two videos about back care), acupuncture (8 to 10 sessions), or massage (8 to 10 sessions). Compared with self-care, massage and acupuncture provided significantly greater pain relief after 10 weeks. But after a year, the massage group fared better than those who received acupuncture.

In African folk medicine, women called “doulas” gently massage women in labor to ease the delivery. Dr. Field divided women going into labor into two groups, each with a labor coach. She told the coaches of one group to help by doing “what comes naturally.” In the other group, she trained the coaches in massage, and had them give 20-minute massages regularly throughout labor. The massaged women had lower levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, in their saliva, and reported less pain and anxiety during their labors.

Anxiety and Depression

Massage also helps relieve two other sex-killers, anxiety and depression. In a Florida psychiatric hospital, Dr. Field divided 72 adolescents into two groups. Twenty controls viewed relaxing videos, while the 52 others received a 30-minute back massage every day for five days. Based on staff evaluations, the massaged group showed less depression and anxiety.

Immune Boost

Some evidence suggests that massage enhances immune function, so it might help prevent and treat illness in general. Boston researchers gave 32 people either a 10-

minute rest on a massage table, or a 10-minute back rub. Both groups provided saliva samples before and after. The non-massaged showed no a disease-fighting protein produced by the immune system. But in the massaged group, levels of the protein increased significantly.

Swedish or Shiatsu

In the U.S., two styles of massage predominate—Swedish and deep-tissue massage, notably, shiatsu. Swedish massage is the type most easily incorporated into sex. It was developed 150 years ago by Per Henrik Ling, of Sweden, who integrated ancient Asian massage techniques with a Western understanding of anatomy and physiology. Swedish massage involves long, gliding strokes using the whole hand or the heel of the palm, or kneading strokes with the fingers. Depending on your preference, the pressure of Swedish massage strokes can vary from light, feathery touch to firmer, deeper pressure. Be sure to specify the kind of strokes you prefer.

Massage involves use of massage oil or lotion. Try bath and body shops, or MyPleasure.com. In general, it's not a good idea to use a sexual lubricant as a massage lotion and vice versa. The two products are formulated differently. Massage lotion feels marvelous on the skin during massage, but it's generally not slippery enough to work well as a genital lubricant. Meanwhile, sexual lubricants work great for lovemaking, but when used in whole-body massage, they may dry too quickly and feel sticky. It's best to limit lubricant use to the genitals and use massage lotions on the rest of the body.

In addition to incorporating massage into lovemaking, you and your partner might also consider treating each other to professional massages as a prelude to sex. A professional massage is deeply relaxing, and might get you in the mood for sex better than dinner and a movie.

For a professional massage, *don't* go to a massage parlor. Most massage parlors are fronts for prostitution where about the only thing you *can't* get is a good massage.

Instead, look for a licensed or certified massage therapist. States that regulate massage allow those who pass credentialing requirements to call themselves licensed massage therapists (L.M.T.), certified massage therapists (C.M.T.) or some other designation. Currently, more than half the states and the District of Columbia regulate massage therapy. Most use the criteria developed by three national organizations: the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork (NCBTMB), the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA), or

the Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals (ABMP). All three organizations require 500 hours of training at a massage school accredited by the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation, an independent, quality-control organization.

If you live in a state without credentialing, you can still find a well-trained massage therapist by asking: Are you certified by the NCBTMB? Or are you a “professional member” of the AMTA? Or do you hold an A.C.M.T. credential from the ABMP?

All three organizations also make referrals to credentialed members around the country:

The American Massage Therapy Association, 820 Davis St., Suite 100, Evanston, IL 60201; (847) 864-0123; www.amtamassage.org.

Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals (ABMT) 1271 Sugarbush Dr., Evergreen, CO 80439; (800) 458- 2267; www.abmp.com.

The National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork, 8201 Greensboro Dr. #300, McLean, VA 22102; (703) 610-0236; www.ncbtmb.com.