



Using Massage for Arthritis Symptom Relief

by ALI ESFAHANI

Can Massage Help With Osteoarthritis Symptoms?

One of the most frustrating aspects of being an osteoarthritis (OA) sufferer is navigating through the excessive amounts of “cures” or “guaranteed” remedies that are advertised to help us. It’s hard enough to suffer from the disease, let alone filter out all the useless and gimmicky therapies promised as pain relief.

Because of the massive amounts of therapies offered for osteoarthritis relief, I have become skeptical over the years towards any therapy being as effective as advertised. That being said, one of the more substantial remedies offered nowadays is massage therapy.

Whether it is from a machine, a generous significant other, or a trained massage therapist, massage therapy is becoming one of the most popular complementary therapies offered and some people swear by it.

So can massage help with the symptoms of osteoarthritis? Before I answer this question, I want to investigate the topic further.

What Is Massage?

I think it’s important we define the topic before we analyze whether it is effective. According to the Mayo Clinic, massage is the term we use for “pressing, rubbing and manipulating your skin, muscles, tendons and ligaments.”

Simple enough, right? Wrong. To complicate things, there are quite a few different types of massage: Swedish, deep, sports, and trigger point are a few of the many different variations of massage.

Massage can be applied with the hands, elbows, knees, feet, or a massage device. Each different massage varies by the amount of pressure applied, the patterns of pressure applied over the body, and the amount of time the pressure is applied to the specific area.

Depending on the application or technique used, massage is used to promote relaxation, wellbeing, and pain relief.

What Is the Mechanism Behind the Potential Pain-Relieving Effects of Massage?

Weirdly enough, the reason for massage’s positive effects are not well understood. The following are a few of the theories as to what is the underlying mechanism for why massage is helpful:

Mechanical Pressure

Massage produces a mechanical pressure on the specific muscle being massaged, and that can increase muscle’s compliance and be less stiff. This increased compliance can result in increased range of joint motion

and decreased active stiffness.

Mechanical pressure can also stimulate blood flow into the applied area. This increased blood flow can improve the circulation of the lymph fluid, which carries metabolic waste away from muscles and other tissues, resulting in improved overall body function.

Lastly, increasing muscle temperature from rubbing can decrease stiffness.

Changes in Your Hormones and Nervous System

Another theory is that massage alters the nervous system (as measured by blood pressure and heart rate) and hormonal levels. These changes in the nervous system and hormones after a massage are attributed to the physiological relax response that massage can trigger in the body.

Relaxation

This one probably makes the most sense. A reduction in anxiety and an improvement in mood state can lead one to perceive that they are experiencing less pain and stiffness caused by osteoarthritis or another disease.

Positives of Massage

Aside from its potential pain-relieving effects, massage has a major advantage compared to typical osteoarthritis therapies. The biggest advantage is compared to OA medication, injections, or surgeries, there are minimal negative side effects associated with massage.

After an hour-long massage session, the only part of you that is likely to suffer is your wallet. That being said, I do recommend asking your doctor whether it is alright if you are going to try massage therapy for the first time.

Next page: can a massage for arthritis help your symptoms?

Downsides of Massage

There aren't many downsides to getting a massage, but there is one significant disadvantage: getting a massage from a trained therapist can range from \$60-200 per hour!

When I first hurt my back as a college student, I found a great massage therapist who I would visit weekly. After a one-hour session, the pain and tightness in my lower back was significantly reduced.

Although the results of those sessions were great, I realized quickly that I couldn't financially keep up with them. My way of resolving this was to invest in a Shiatsu massage chair; granted the shiatsu massage chair was also expensive, but I used it for years and it was well worth the purchase.

It helped me a fair amount when I had flare-ups or added stiffness on a particular day. Similarly, the start-up cost for any automated massager can be significant but it is well worth the purchase in my experience.

Can Massage Help?

My answer to this question is a confident yes. Although the research on this subject has been limited, studies regarding massage have demonstrated that it is an effective treatment for stress, pain, and muscle tension.

A recent study funded by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine also found that a 60-minute "dose" of Swedish massage therapy delivered once a week for pain due to osteoarthritis of the knee was effective in reducing the pain attributed to OA after eight weeks.

Because it is being adopted as a legitimate complementary therapy, massage therapy is even being offered for a variety of medical conditions other than osteoarthritis. Some of these diseases include but are not limited to: anxiety, fibromyalgia, headaches, insomnia, myofascial pain syndrome, soft tissue injuries, sports injuries, and TMJ pain.

More research needs to be conducted so we may fully understand the utilities of massage and why it works, it is a relatively safe and worthwhile option to use in the treatment of the symptoms of osteoarthritis.

I do recommend that if you are thinking of beginning a new massage therapy, to consult your primary care doctor to make sure it is safe for you to start the regimen.

Even though I do believe that massage is a good option for relief of the symptoms of osteoarthritis, there is no guarantee that a specific type of massage will alleviate the symptoms of your osteoarthritis.

What? Before you never read any of my articles ever again, let me explain!

Osteoarthritis is a very common and often trivialized disease by many sections of society. However, the field of medicine is learning that it is a more complex entity than was thought of previously.

In fact, some physicians approach osteoarthritis in different joints as separate diseases instead of grouping them together under one umbrella. This means that the osteoarthritis in your hands will potentially react to different treatments differently than the osteoarthritis in your neighbor's knees or my spine.

That is why massage can have potentially different effects for different osteoarthritis sufferers. This a topic in medicine that will continue to develop and more answers will be revealed in the future. But for the time being, the best thing you can do is have an open mind and try massage therapy for yourself!