

Evidence Based Massage: Cancer

How your local Massage Therapist fits into the primary care paradigm

Until relatively recently, common wisdom held that Massage Therapy was contraindicated for patients with cancer due to its circulatory-enhancing effects. However, current studies have demonstrated substantial symptom relief and immune system benefits from massage. The Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York undertook a large and significant study. Over a 3-year period, 1290 cancer patients were treated with either Swedish Massage or foot massage. Symptom scores were reduced by approximately 50%, even for patients reporting high baseline scores. Outpatients of the Center improved about 10% more than inpatients.¹ Outcomes from Swedish Massage were superior to those from foot massage. The researchers concluded that massage therapy achieves major reductions in cancer patients' pain, fatigue, nausea, anxiety and depression, and that Massage Therapy appears to be a non-invasive and inexpensive means of symptom control for patients with serious chronic illness.

In another study investigating immune and neuroendocrine function, 34 Stage 1 and 2 breast cancer patients were randomly assigned to either a massage group or a control group. The immediate massage therapy effects included reduced anxiety, depressed mood and anger. The longer-term massage effects included reduced depression and hostility, and increased urinary dopamine, serotonin values, NK cell number, and lymphocytes.²

The efficacy of Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD) in the treatment of lymphoedema is well documented. In one recent case study, researchers measured the effect of MLD on 3 lymphoedema patients and demonstrated a significant clinical effect on the total fluid levels in the massaged and affected lymphoedematous limbs.

They also recorded a softening of the tissues of all of the major lymphatic territories.³

A recent meta-analysis encompassing 27 clinical trials of massage and meditation also suggests that there is substantial benefit in incorporating massage into the palliative care model. Results from 26 of the 27 trials showed significant improvements in symptoms such as anxiety, emotional distress, comfort, nausea and pain.⁴ Although variations in methodology raised some questions about the clinical significance of this review, the principal finding was that the trials of massage exhibited substantial benefit for the end-of-life patient.

Your local Massage Therapist can work in close co-operation with the primary care team to reduce the symptoms and distress associated with cancer. The emerging evidence suggests a pivotal role for the Massage Therapist in the management of both the physical and psychological effects of serious, life-threatening illnesses.

¹B. Cassileth and A. Vickers, "Massage Therapy for Symptom Control: Outcome Study at a Major Cancer Center", **Journal of Pain and Symptom Management**, Vol. 28 No. 3 September 2004

²M. Hernandez-Reif, G. Ironson, T. Field, J. Hurley, G. Katz, M. Diego, S. Weiss, M. Fletcher, S. Schanberg, C. Kuhn, I. Burman, "Breast cancer patients have improved immune and neuroendocrine functions following massage therapy", **Journal of Psychosomatic Research** 57 (2004) 45-52

³R. Harris, N. Piller, "Three case studies indicating the effectiveness of manual lymph drainage on patients with primary and secondary lymphoedema using objective measuring tools", **Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies** (2003) 7(4), 213-221

⁴W. Lafferty, L. Downey, R. McCarty, L. Standish, D. Patrick, "Evaluating CAM treatment at the end of life: A review of clinical trials for massage and meditation", **Complementary Therapies in Medicine** (2006) 14, 100-112

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