

Making the Most of Your Massage

How to Prolong the Benefits of Bodywork

Barbara Hey

A massage works in wonderful ways, easing stress and pain, calming the nervous system, increasing circulation, loosening tight muscles, stimulating internal organs, and enhancing skin. The multiplicity of physiological responses sends a simple, clear message to the mind: Massage feels good. Of course, you want to hold on to that just-had-a-massage feeling -- total body relaxation, muscles relaxed and at ease, and fluid movement restored -- for as long as possible.

But how long that bliss lasts depends on the state of your body. If you're suffering from chronic pain or recovering from injury, then it may take more sessions and perhaps different

Massage Frequency

How often you receive massage depends on why you're seeking massage. In dealing with the general tension of everyday commutes, computer work, and time demands, a monthly massage may be enough to sustain you. On the other hand, if you're seeking massage for chronic pain, you may need regular treatments every week or two. Or if you're addressing an acute injury or dealing with high levels of stress, you may need more frequent sessions. Your situation will dictate the optimum time between treatments, and your practitioner will work with you to determine the best course of action.



The more often you receive massage, the more therapeutic it becomes.

modalities before optimal health is restored.

If massage is part of your regular health regimen, then it's more likely the effects will endure. In other words, the effects of massage are cumulative, like any healthy habit. The more often you get a massage, the greater and longer-lasting the benefits.

"You need to consider how you felt before the session and how you felt after, and then look at how long you maintain that," says Pieter Sommen, the chair of the eastern department in the Swedish Institute School of Massage Therapy in New York.

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A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.

-O.W. Holmes

Office Hours and Contact

Cristina's Outcall Massage Service
Cristina Jackson, LMT
FL: 850-496-7602
MA 49020 / LA 2767-01

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In general, experts say "regular" is preferable, but how regular depends on your situation. While daily massage would be delightful, practical considerations such as cost, time, and physical need likely determine the frequency of treatments. "It's best to maintain a schedule," says Eeris Kallil, CMT, a shiatsu instructor at the Boulder College of Massage Therapy in Colorado. "That way the body becomes conditioned and prepared for session at specific intervals."

Maintenance

Whether you get a massage weekly, monthly, or just every once in a while, the following habits can maximize and extend the afterglow of treatment.

WATER

One bit of advice you'll hear over and over again is to drink plenty of water after a massage. Bodywork -- no matter the particular modality -- releases toxins, such as lactic acid and carbonic acid, that need to be flushed from the body. Massage also promotes circulation, increasing blood flow and oxygen and stimulating the lymphatic system, which helps rid the body of pathogens. After-massage hydration supports these functions, helping to eliminate released impurities, sooner rather than later.

STRETCHING

Another helpful habit is stretching between massages to maintain joint mobility, prevent muscles from tightening up again, and keeping the life energy flowing. This may mean doing yoga or whatever specific or full-body stretches suggested by your practitioner. After a shiatsu session, for example, your practitioner may recommend "makko-ho" stretches, a series of six exercises designed to keep energy circulating. "This series of stretches take anywhere from 5 to 10 minutes a day, but really help keep the chi flowing through the body," says Kallil.

EXERCISE

Working out can also help maintain the benefits of massage, and this habit should be continually cultivated. However, if you're receiving massage therapy to help speed muscle strain recovery, you may need to ease up on the exercise for a while and give the body time to heal -- particularly if you're

recovering from a strenuous body-pummeling training regimen. "You don't want to over-work your body," says Kallil. That is, if running is taking a toll, try something more gentle and meditative such as swimming, walking, or tai chi.

BODY AWARENESS

After a massage, respect how your body feels. If your body seems to ask for rest, give in to that demand. This may mean backing off the to-do list, taking it easy, moving slower, and perhaps doing less for a while. And don't allow yourself to get fatigued because it will undermine the effects of massage. Get sufficient sleep to allow the body to absorb the effects and regain vitality.

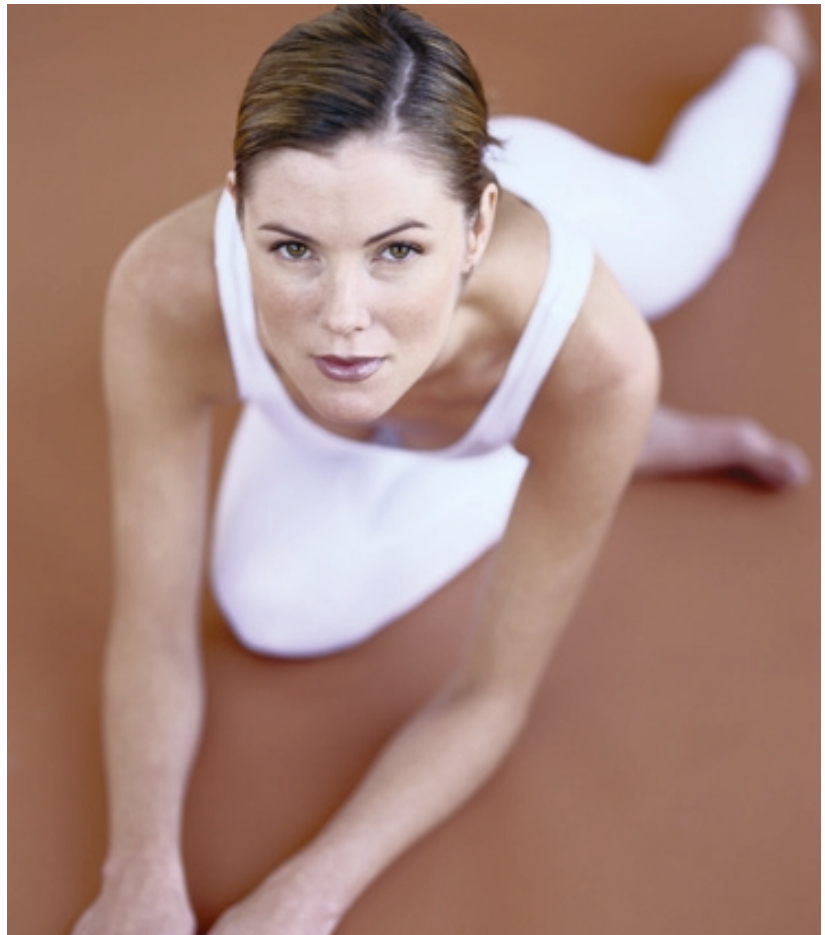
DIET

Finally, since you've just rid the body of toxins, support the body's renewed state by adhering to a healthy diet rich in

fruits and vegetables, which will continue the detoxification process. Lay off the espresso and all adrenaline-challenges for a time -- which would short-circuit relaxation anyway -- and enjoy the calm.

The benefits of massage are many, including: increasing circulation, allowing the body to pump more oxygen and nutrients throughout the body; stimulating lymph flow and boosting immunity; relaxing overused or tight muscles; increasing joint mobility and range of motion; reducing recovery time after strenuous workouts or surgery; and relieving back pain and migraines, just to name a few.

After receiving a massage, clients feel rejuvenated, relaxed, and refreshed. By opting for a few lifestyle choices, you can extend these benefits and get the most out of your massage.



Stretching between massages helps maintain relaxed muscles, joint mobility, and energy flow.

Keeping Your Back Healthy

Tips to Avoid Lasting Pain

Chances are good that, at some point in your life, you will have back pain. In fact, 70-85 percent of Americans will experience back pain at some point in their lives. But even with those odds, there are still several ways to minimize your risk and give yourself the best chance to live pain-free.

Several factors can cause back pain, including stress, poor posture, bad ergonomics, lack of exercise, arthritis, osteoporosis, a sedentary lifestyle, overexertion, pregnancy, kidney stones, fibromyalgia, excess weight, and more.

With all of these potential causes lurking, it's important to look at behaviors that can help you prevent and avoid back pain before it starts. Here are a few simple healthy back tips from the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke:

- Stretch and warm tissues before exercise or other strenuous activities.
- Practice good posture. Avoid

slouching when sitting or standing.

--When standing, keep your weight balanced on both feet.

--Follow good ergonomics in the workplace. When sitting for long periods of time, rest your feet on a foot support. Make sure your chair and work surfaces are at the proper height. Get up and move around in between long sitting stints.

--Avoid high-heeled shoes.

--Watch your weight. Excess weight, especially around the waist, can put undue stress on lower back muscles.

--Exercise. Core strengthening moves, especially, will also benefit your back.

--Don't lift items that are heavier than you can handle. Remember to lift with your knees, not your back. Pull in your stomach muscles, keep your head down and in line with your straight back, and do not twist when lifting.

--Get a massage. Using therapeutic bodywork can melt pain-inducing stress away from your back and the rest of your body.



Massage is a great way to beat back pain.

Massage for Old Injuries

Ancient Injuries Don't Have to Make You Feel Old

Art Riggs

Injuries such as chronic back pain, trick knees, and sticky shoulders are not necessarily something you just have to live with. Massage techniques might hold the key to unlocking this old pain.

Will Massage Help?

The benefits of massage will depend on the extent of the injury, how long ago it occurred, and on the skill of the therapist. Chronic and old injuries often require deeper and more precise treatments with less emphasis on general relaxation and working on the whole body. Massage works best for soft tissue injuries to muscles and tendons and is most effective in releasing adhesions and lengthening muscles that have shortened due to compensatory reactions to the injury. Tight and fibrous muscles not only hurt at the muscle or its tendon, but can also interfere with proper joint

movement and cause pain far away from the original injury.

Therapists who perform such work often have specialized names for their work--such as orthopedic massage, neuromuscular therapy, myofascial release, medical massage, etc.--but many massage therapists utilize an eclectic approach combining the best of the specialties.

It Works!

A recent Consumer Reports article ran the results of a survey of thousands of its readers and reported that massage was equal to chiropractic care in many areas, including back and neck pain. Massage also ranked significantly higher than some other forms of treatment, such as physical therapy or drugs.

If that nagging injury persists, consider booking a massage. Be sure to discuss the injury with your practitioner: How did you receive the injury? Have you reinjured it? And what exactly are your symptoms? Often, the body compensates in one area to protect another that has been traumatized, and this can create new problems.

Discuss the issues with your massage therapist. (Sometimes just talking about old injuries can play a significant role in the healing process.) Together, the two of you can work to determine a treatment plan.

*Holding on to
anger is like
grasping a hot
coal with the
intent of
throwing it at
someone else;
you're the one
who gets burned.*
-Buddha

Let Me Come and Help You RELAX & HEAL! Be good to yourself. YOU DESERVE IT!

Cristina's Outcall Massage

850-496-7602

www.Cristina.MassageTherapy.com, Fl 32548



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