

## **Massage Therapy Helps Back Pain**

*By Susan Jackson Grubb, NCMT, CNMT*

Absenteeism, lost wages and reduced productivity due to low back pain are costly to people, companies, and corporations. It is estimated that eighty percent of Americans will experience back pain at some time in their lives. About half of those who suffer from an episode will have another occurrence within one year.

After cold and flu symptoms, backaches are the most common reason for doctor visits; and ranks with cardiovascular diseases and mental illnesses as a major cause of the escalation of health care and workers' compensation costs. Americans spend approximately \$90 billion annually to treat low back pain.

### **Conservative Treatment is Commonly Tried First**

Although back pain can be debilitating, conservative treatment is the most likely course of action. Physicians usually recommend eight to twelve weeks of conservative treatment before considering surgery.

In the United States, massage therapy is considered a conservative treatment, also known as an alternative or complementary therapy. If an injury is related to work, Workers' Compensation may reimburse for it. Only a few health insurance companies recognize its health benefits.

On the European continent massage therapy is considered a conventional treatment, particularly for back pain. In Austria, for example, eighty-seven percent of patients with back pain receive-and are usually reimbursed for-this conservative treatment.

### **The Function of the Low Back is Different**

The structures of the low back have a strong influence on well being. Unlike other parts of the body, they regulate the functions and affect the health of the abdominal and pelvic organs, as well as the muscles, joints, and bones of the legs.

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As a person bends, twists, walks, runs, or performs the activities of daily living, the low back cushions the weight of the upper body. As a result, the back tissues are constantly subjected to varying strains and, in certain settings, they can be sprained and injured leading to inflammation and pain. As the muscles tighten on one side of the spine, the muscles on the other side must stretch. This can keep the back out of alignment and continue the cycle of pain.

### **Research Shows Massage Therapy is a Benefit**

Two recent studies have shown that massage therapy is effective for relieving symptoms and increasing function among people with chronic back pain. The Touch Research Institute, in conjunction with the Miami School of Medicine, found that adults with chronic low back pain got relief from massage therapy. Massage eased pain, reduced depression and anxiety, and improved sleep and range of motion. It also positively affected the biochemical system of the body by increasing serotonin and dopamine levels.

The authors of this study, with an eye on performance in the work place, wrote that future studies might “examine the impact of massage therapy on job productivity and absenteeism for individuals with chronic low back problems.”

The Center for Health Studies in Seattle, Washington, found that a ten-week program of massage therapy using Swedish and deep-tissue massage was the most effective of the three treatments studied—massage therapy, acupuncture, and self-care education. After one year, the massage group still reported the greatest benefit.

With thoughts of healthcare cost containment, the authors wrote, “The findings that the benefits of massage therapy persist well beyond the last treatment and the suggestion of possible reductions in subsequent health care utilization, make massage therapy a high priority for further study”.

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### **Swedish Massage**

Swedish and deep tissue massage achieved benefit in both studies. With Swedish massage, the mechanical action of hands on the skin and the structures beneath it, enhanced circulation of blood and lymph fluid resulting in an increased supply of oxygen and the removal of waste products-creators of pain-to the area. Swedish massage techniques increased the pain threshold, relaxed tight muscles, relaxed the mind, and reduced anxiety; which affected the perception of pain positively.

### **Deep Tissue Massage**

A popular form of medical or deep-tissue massage is neuromuscular therapy. The American Academy of Pain Management recognizes this type of massage as an effective treatment for back pain caused by soft tissue injury, such as muscle strain or sprain.

In neuromuscular therapy, alternating levels of concentrated pressure are applied to areas of muscle spasm. Because they are ischemic, muscles in spasm will be painful to the touch. Ischemia means the muscle is lacking proper blood flow, probably due to muscle spasm. When receiving neuromuscular therapy, communication with the massage therapist about pain levels is important—is the pressure is too much or too little? Is the pain getting better or worse? The pressure should never be overly painful. In fact, most people describe it as “good pain.”

After the trigger point is released, the muscle should receive enough blood and oxygen to remain noticeably improved for four to fourteen days after the session, depending on stress, activity level, and severity of pain prior to beginning therapy. The length of time should increase as the muscles heal.

### **Finding a Well-Trained Therapist**

Massage therapy is a safe healthcare treatment, provided the therapist is well trained. Because massage therapists are not licensed in Colorado, the best way to find a well

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trained massage therapist is to ask about their education. In this state, a massage therapist should have graduated from a school of massage therapy accredited by the state where it is located, with at least 500 hours of training. No school, or less training, is a red flag.

Some massage therapy organizations list trained therapists on their websites. Both the American Massage Therapy Association [www.amtamassage.org](http://www.amtamassage.org) and Associated Bodyworkers and Massage Professionals [www.abmp.com](http://www.abmp.com) have such listings.

#### *About the Author:*

Susan Jackson Grubb, President of Center for Neuromuscular Massage Therapy, Inc. in the Cherry Creek area of Denver is a graduate of the Boulder College of Massage Therapy, and has been a massage therapist since 1984. All nine therapists at the center are graduates of massage therapy schools-each with twice the state requirement for training, are nationally certified, are licensed with the City and County of Denver, and are members of the American Massage Therapy Association. For more information visit [www.cnmtmassage.com](http://www.cnmtmassage.com)

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