

Massage Therapy – Good for the Body and the Mind

Looking for a way to drug-free way to control pain and stress in your patients? Consider massage -- it's relaxing for the mind as well as the body, and evidence of its effectiveness is growing. However, as with any complementary/alternative modalities (CAM), know the pro's and con's, as well as the therapist's credentials and laws governing supervision, before delegating care to a non-veterinarian provider.

In contrast to manipulative therapy that targets arthroal structures, massage focuses on soft tissue elements – namely, muscles and the connective tissue that envelopes them. Massage can decrease pain, augment blood and lymph circulation, and either reduce or improve muscle tone. A secondary benefit is mental relaxation, as evidenced by a study reported in *Journal of Equine Veterinary Science*, February 2004, wherein McBride et al. documented a significant reduction in heart rate when horses experienced massage at the withers, mid-cervical region, and croup. A 2003 study on rat massage (reported in *Complementary Medicine*) showed that gentle stroking of the thorax and abdomen relaxed the animals sufficiently to permit echocardiography with less or no sedating medication. Furthermore, soft tissue techniques like massage can improve internal organ function and promote digestion by relieving constipation.

Massage interventions vary widely, ranging from the traditional kneading and stroking to deep tissue work that actually incites inflammation in order to promote healing. This plurality of techniques makes it difficult to perform systematic reviews on the effectiveness and safety of massage.

Undoubtedly, the most commonly researched approach is “Swedish massage”, also known as “classic muscular massage”. Swedish massage incorporates several maneuvers, including effleurage (stroking and gliding), tapotment (percussion), petrissage (kneading), and friction massage. The compressive maneuvers in effleurage reduce muscle tone and relax the patient, while its firm pressure accelerates blood and lymph flow. Rapid strokes increase muscle tone in preparation for athletic competition. Tapotment vibrates tissue, triggers cutaneous reflexes, and induces vasodilation. It helps disperse interstitial fluid and increase muscle tone. Petrissage stretches adherent fibrous tissue and relieves muscle spasm. Friction massage stretches connective tissue to reduce contractures. Swedish massage has remarkable similarities to the Chinese manual therapy technique: “Tui Na”.

“Connective tissue massage” from Germany and the United States technique called “Rolfing” introduces strong and often painful deep tissue work to mobilize subcutaneous tissues of the trunk and limbs. Deep massage can cause sufficient muscle impact as to elevate serum concentrations of myoglobin,

creatine kinase, and lactate dehydrogenase. Mobilizing restricted connective tissue adhesions stimulates of autonomic nerve fibers within the fascia, which may indirectly stimulate internal organ function.

“Manual lymph drainage” (MLD) treats lymphedema – the accumulation of excess fluid in the body when lymphatic drainage pathways become obstructed – such as after surgery or trauma. The MLD therapist gently strokes along lymphatic vessels and over lymph nodes in order to facilitate passive return of lymph fluid to the vascular system.

A relatively new technique called “augmented soft tissue mobilization therapy” purposefully creates microtrauma in tendons in order to promote tendon repair, through fibroblast proliferation following incited inflammation.

Massage is contraindicated in areas near acute inflammation, skin infection, bone fracture, burn, deep vein thrombosis, and cancer. Deep massage of the abdomen can and has caused damage to organs (rupture/bleeding), nerve damage from direct pressure onto nerves, embolization of thrombi, and dislodgement of stents or catheters. Due to widespread underreporting of adverse events in complementary therapies, the true range and incidence of risks from massage remain unknown.

Studies show that massage therapist who have rigorous training and more experience deliver the most significant benefits. The current minimum training standard for an entry level human massage therapist is 500 hours of in-class supervised instruction. At least 100 of these 500 hours cover anatomy, physiology, and pathology and 200 hours covers technique instruction. There are over 800 human massage therapy training programs in the US; most meet the 500-hour minimum standard and many offer more. Twenty-nine states, plus the District of Columbia, have statewide licensure for human massage therapists. Most of these states require 500 hours of training, and most also require successful completion of the National Certification Examination, although certain states have their own examination and some have none.

In contrast, training standards and licensing for animal massage therapists are practically non-existent. There are no hands-on requirements, and many courses run at a distance – using video instruction. With no face-to-face instruction, animal massage therapists lack proper correction when employing excessive pressure and faulty technique. Furthermore, without instruction on animal behavior, therapists may not recognize signs of pain or stress in the animals they massage. Most human CAM providers practicing on animals profess a “deep love” of animals, yet fail to attain veterinary or technician training, meaning they will likely be unable to recognize zoonotic disease or life-threatening situations. Finally, as with every other complementary modality in veterinary medicine, the term “certification” is essentially meaningless, as anyone

can certify anyone. Thus, the term “certified” animal massage therapist should not be over-interpreted.

State laws governing scope of practice for non-veterinarians practicing on animals are undergoing constant change, due to the unrelenting pressure from human CAM providers to offer animal care. Some states only allow veterinarians or veterinary technicians to perform massage; others require non-veterinarians to work under the direct supervision of a veterinarian. The International Association of Animal Massage and Bodywork (IAAMB) offers liability insurance for animal massage therapists, but veterinarians sending animals to massage therapists need to fully understand the laws governing CAM treatments by non-veterinarians. Those supervising massage therapists remain liable for problems resulting from treatment, regardless of whether that supervision is direct or indirect.

Making massage work for everyone involved – animals, the clients, and the practitioners – requires good communication, record keeping, and continued veterinarian management of patient care.