

Massage and Cancer:

an introduction to the benefits of touch



An information sheet for people with cancer, their families and friends.

Many people with cancer wonder whether any complementary therapies can help them. Massage and other gentle body-based practices that focus on the positive effects of human touch are very popular complementary therapies that you might enjoy.

This information sheet explains the benefits of touch and massage during and following cancer treatment. It includes advice on how to receive a safe, comfortable massage from a professional, as well as tips for family members and friends who wish to give you a simple, gentle massage at home.

“Massage gave me something to look forward to during a very bleak time.”

Touch is important for well-being. One of the marvels of touch is that it benefits people at all stages of life and on every level – physical, emotional and mental. It improves sleep, reduces muscular tension, provides a sense of calm, and can improve self-image, concentration and quality of life.

Touch is especially needed during illness. It is a powerful expression of care, acceptance and emotional nourishment. During a medical procedure, before surgery, or in the midst of discomfort or anxiety, touch from friends or family can be very soothing.

Body-based practices are sometimes called touch, physical or manual therapies, or bodywork. Therapists perform a series of specialised movements or strokes on the client's body to provide relaxation or relief from physical and emotional symptoms.

Touch through massage

When family members and friends offer touch to a person with cancer by holding hands, hugging and sitting close by, this physical contact is very valuable. Another way you can receive touch is through massage.

When many people think of massage, they relate it to sore muscles or a chance to unwind. It feels good after a stressful day, as part of a beauty treatment, or after exercise. People of all ages – from babies to the elderly – thrive on massage.

For the person receiving treatment for cancer or recovering from it, massage takes on other meanings. Instead of being used to work out knots, detoxify the body, or increase range of motion, massage can lower anxiety and pain, improve energy and decrease nausea. It is a way to feel more loved and helps to re-establish a connection with yourself and others. It may ease the discomfort of a medical procedure or help pass the time while waiting for a consultation with the doctor.

Some people believe that massaging someone with cancer – rather than simply touching them – may be harmful. However, light, relaxing massage can safely be given to people at all stages of their cancer journey. Tumour or treatment sites should not be massaged to avoid discomfort or undue pressure on the affected area and underlying organs. If you have any concerns, you can talk to your doctor or the Cancer Council Helpline.

A complement to conventional medicine

Massage is one of the most popular complementary therapies. Complementary therapies are used in conjunction with conventional or mainstream medicine. They are not used as an alternative to chemotherapy, radiotherapy, surgery or drug therapy. While massage is not a cure for cancer, it may help diminish the side effects of conventional treatments and improve quality of life.

Receiving comforting, attentive touch can remind you that your body can still be a source of pleasure. Some benefits people have described from receiving massage include feeling whole again, being able to share feelings in an informal setting, re-establishing a positive body image, and rebuilding hope.

The spread of cancer

Some people worry that massage can spread cancer cells throughout the body via the lymphatic system (a part of the body's immune system). However, it is well documented that massage does not contribute to the spread of cancer.

The lymphatic system is a network of vessels, organs and nodes through which lymphatic fluid (lymph) flows. Lymphatic circulation occurs naturally when skeletal muscles contract and compress lymph vessels to force the movement of lymph. Gentle massage does not increase lymphatic circulation any more than activities such as exercising or gardening.

Cancer may metastasise (spread) into the lymphatic system via the lymph nodes, or it may start in the lymphatic system itself. However, the circulation of lymph – from massage or other movement – does not cause cancer to spread. Researchers have shown that the development and spread of cancer is because of genetic mutations (changes to a cell's DNA) and other processes in the body.

Benefits of massage

Many scientific studies have been conducted to determine the effects of various body-based practices on people having treatment for cancer, particularly chemotherapy and surgery. Research shows that relaxation massage can reduce:

- pain
- fatigue
- anxiety
- depression
- nausea.

Other benefits may include improvements in:

- sleep
- neuropathy (nerve damage or disturbance)
- quality of life
- mental clarity and alertness
- meaningful social interaction.

Another benefit of massage is reducing lymphoedema, which is swelling in the tissues caused by a build-up of fluid after surgery or radiotherapy to the lymph nodes. Massage needs to be very light, and ideally is part of a manual lymphatic drainage or total lymphatic drainage treatment. Therapists not trained in these techniques should avoid the affected area or only use very gentle touch. For more information see www.lymphoedema.org.au.

Massage between friends, family members or a partner can be a form of non-verbal communication to show love, acceptance, comfort and care.



Massage and touch therapies for people with cancer

There are many styles of massage and other touch therapies that are commonly used for people with cancer or recovering from it. The key to a beneficial treatment is not the type of therapy but the therapist's ability to adjust the session, depending on a person's medical history, age, constitution and individual requests.

Massage styles

Scientific evidence supports the use of these massage techniques when done gently for reducing various side effects of cancer and improving people's quality of life. They all require adjustments to stroke pressure.

- **Acupressure:** Pressure points on the body are massaged to relieve physical symptoms in different organs.
- **Aromatherapy:** Aromatic essential oils are blended in a carrier oil and applied to the skin during a massage to release stress and tension.
- **Lomi lomi or ka huna massage:** Hawaiian style of massage that stimulates the flow of energy and releases stress and tension.
- **Myofascial release:** Sliding pressure gently stretches and heats tissue to release tension in and between the muscles.
- **Reflexology:** The feet are massaged in specific areas that correlate to different parts of the body to reduce imbalances.
- **Seated chair massage:** Massage is focused on the head, neck, shoulders, back and arms to release stress and tension.
- **Shiatsu:** Pressure points are massaged lightly with the fingers, thumbs, elbows, knees, hands and feet to restore vitality.
- **Swedish massage:** Long, flowing strokes tone soft tissues, stimulate circulation, improve oxygen flow and relax muscles.
- **Trigger point therapy:** Specific points in the soft tissue of the body are compressed and stretched to reduce muscular pain.

Other touch therapies

Anecdotal (personal) reports suggest that these gentle styles of touch may benefit people with cancer by promoting relaxation and reducing pain. They require minimal or no changes, as the pressure of the touch is very light.

- **Bowen therapy:** Through gentle touching and the movement of soft tissue and muscles, the body feels deeply relaxed.
- **Craniosacral therapy:** Subtle manipulation of the head and spine encourages the release of stress and tension from the body.
- **Healing touch:** The therapist's hands softly touch the body to help restore an inner feeling of harmony, balance and well-being.
- **Jin shin jyutsu:** Fingertips or hands are placed on key parts of the body and special breathing techniques help restore the body's energy.
- **Polarity therapy:** Gently touching and rocking the body, and stretching or rotating the legs, leads to deep relaxation and improved well-being.
- **Reiki:** The hands are gently placed in different positions along the body or slightly above the body, which is calming and restorative.
- **Therapeutic touch:** Soothing, rhythmic movements along the body promote peacefulness and relaxation by restoring the body's energy.

For more information, see the booklet *Understanding Complementary Therapies*, available free from the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

Massage, for me, makes an unbearable day bearable.

Making the right adjustments

Cancer treatments place a great deal of demand on the body, so a person having chemotherapy or radiation does not need the same type of massage as a person who has just completed a triathlon. Adjustments to the massage technique are necessary, the most common of which is decreased pressure and speed of strokes.

After such a massage, you will probably feel relaxed, more energetic and nurtured. If a session is too vigorous or deep, you may feel fatigue, pain, flu-like symptoms, bruising or a sense of invasiveness. These side effects can be minimised or avoided by being open about your medical history and your individual needs.

Adjustments for the long-term survivor

Eventually, you may be able to return to more vigorous types of massage, but make sure you ask your therapist to use less pressure in any area that you are still experiencing discomfort. Some conditions, listed below, will require adjustments to the massage technique for a long period of time.

- **Risk of lymphoedema:** If part of your treatment or diagnostic process included the removal of lymph nodes from the neck, armpit or groin, you should only have gentle massage in that quadrant of the body.
- **Bone fragility:** Some treatments, such as radiation or medications, or the disease itself, may cause the bones to become more fragile. Care should be taken in those areas to avoid undue pressure.
- **Neuropathy:** Certain chemotherapies can cause long-term numbness in the hands and feet. A lighter pressure is best for those areas.

Receiving professional massage

The goal of receiving massage during treatment and recovery should be comfort, support, physical nourishment of the skin, and emotional nurturing. In this restful state, side effects of cancer treatments, such as pain, fatigue and anxiety, are reduced and your overall well-being can improve.

1. Choosing a therapist: It is recommended that you choose a therapist who is a member of a professional association that represents massage therapists (see back page for contact details). These associations ensure that therapists who hold membership with them have received adequate professional training in massage, undertake continuing professional education, and have a current first-aid certificate and professional indemnity insurance.

Ask a potential massage therapist about their specific training and experience in working with people who have cancer. For example:

- What types of massage or touch therapies have you been trained in? (See page 3 for a list of different therapies.)
- Have you been trained to work with someone with a history of cancer?
- What type of precautions would you take for me?
- What type of clients do you most often work with? (Ideally they are people who require special adjustments such as infants, the elderly, or those with a serious illness.)
- Would you be able to liaise with my doctors or other health professionals, if required?
- Are you able to treat me at home if I am unwell?

A letter from your oncologist about your diagnosis and treatment will assist your massage therapist to develop an appropriate massage plan for you.

2. Discussing your medical history: It is important to talk about your medical history with your therapist, even if the massage is part of a beauty routine such as a facial or pedicure. This will help the therapist make the right adjustments to the session so that it is safe and comfortable for you.

A number of the side effects caused by chemotherapy, radiation and surgery require the therapist to decrease the pressure of their strokes and to be mindful of areas affected by such things as medical devices or fragile bones. Let the therapist know if you are affected by any of the following conditions:

- fatigue
- risk of easy bruising or bleeding
- low white blood cell count
- bone metastases or fragile bones as a result of osteoporosis
- recent blood clot
- oedema or lymphoedema
- nausea
- medical devices such as a catheter or stoma bag
- pain
- incisions
- neuropathy
- skin conditions such as rashes, broken areas of skin, or fungal infections.

3. Taking it slowly: When starting a massage program, it is important for the therapist to begin with moderately light pressure. Gauge the effects of the session not only by how the massage strokes feel in the moment but by how you feel 24 hours afterwards. The massage may be enjoyable while you are receiving it, but a few hours later you may feel excessively tired or in pain, even if the pressure was light. If you do not feel any side effects from the massage within 24 hours and want to increase the pressure of the strokes, do so in small, incremental steps until you find the right level of pressure for you.

4. Matching your energy: During the treatment and recovery period, your energy levels may be different from day to day. The massage should be adjusted to match how you are feeling on the given day.

5. Feeling safe: You should feel safe, respected and comfortable during a massage. It is important to communicate your needs to the therapist. For example, let them know if their pressure is too strong or if you are feeling cold. If you do not feel comfortable for whatever reason, and the therapist is unable to make the adjustments you have requested, stop the session.

Most professional massage sessions last for 30 to 60 minutes and usually cost \$60 to \$80 per hour. Prices vary, depending on the therapist's location, their training and experience. If you have private health insurance, check with your fund to see if you are eligible for a rebate.

“After chemotherapy, I started receiving some gentle massage. I found I was able to care for my children rather than having to stay in bed for days.”



Massage at home

Receiving a massage

Family and friends are often eager to do something useful for you. One way you may like them to help is by giving you a simple, gentle massage.

If they do so, they should remove jewellery and cut their nails to avoid causing you discomfort. They must also make the same adjustments that a professional would by reducing their pressure and the speed of the massage strokes. If you feel pain or discomfort, ask them for gentler pressure or to change the area of massage.

Massage sessions need not be long – any duration from a few minutes here and there to a planned half-hour can benefit you enormously. While using lotion or oil enhances massage for many people, you can also remain clothed if you prefer.

Foot massage

Apply lotion to the feet with slow strokes using full-hand contact. Rest one foot between the hands and apply moderate pressure with the thumbs along the sole of the foot.



Head and ear massage

Applying pressure to these areas is calming, reduces pain, and may help with sleep. Using moderate pressure, gently rotate fingertips all around the crown. Move to the top of the ears, gently tweaking them between the thumb and forefinger, down to the lobes. Work the fingers behind the ears and across the back of the skull. Sit down for this massage – or do it yourself.



Back massage

Apply lotion to the back using long, slow strokes with full-hand contact. Gently squeeze muscles with moderate and controlled pressure along the length of the back. You may prefer to lie on your side rather than face down for this massage.

Self-help techniques

Acupressure is similar to acupuncture – without the needles – and it is easy to do yourself. Pressure points on the body represent different organs. Massaging these points gently can help relieve a variety of symptoms.

Focus on each point for a few minutes on both sides of the body. Pressure need not be strong; even soft touch is beneficial.

Pressure point: pericardium 6

Pressure on this point helps reduce nausea, pain, anxiety, insomnia and breathing difficulties. It is in between the ligaments (fibrous tissue) of the wrist. Measure three finger widths down from the base of the palm.

Hold the point with moderate pressure for several minutes or apply small circular strokes with firm pressure.

Xiphoid process

Gently circling the fingers on the xiphoid process (the space where the ribs meet at the breastbone) is calming for many people.

Abdominal massage

This stimulates intestinal motion and soothes the entire body. Apply lotion to the whole abdomen in a right-to-left direction. Also circle the fingers around the bellybutton.

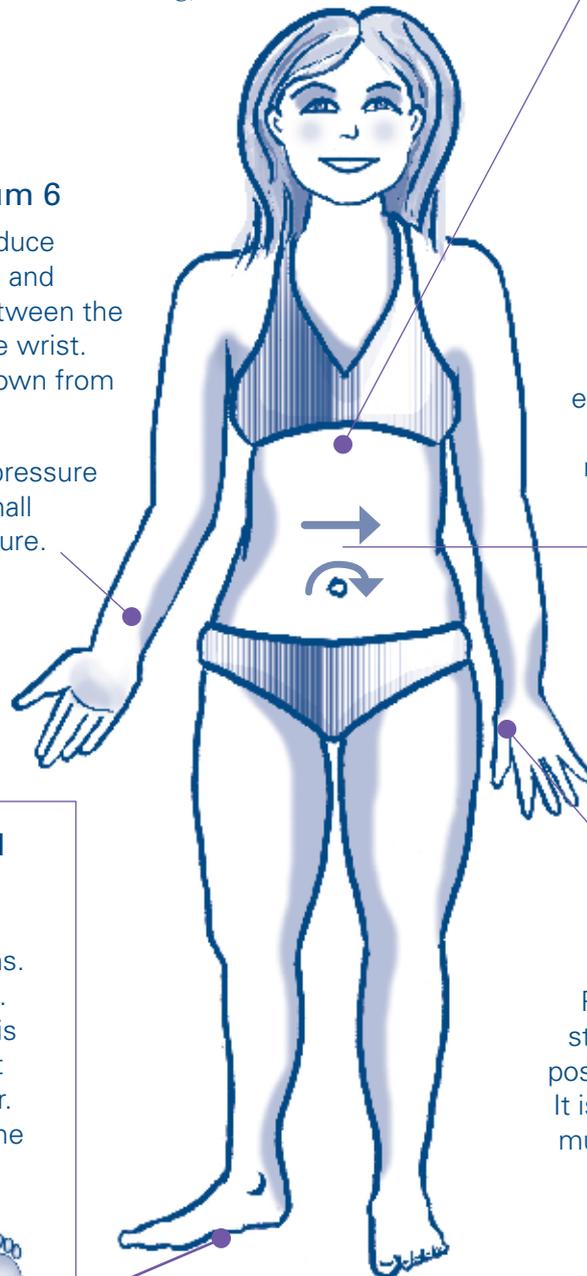
Pressure point: kidney 1

Pressure on this point can increase energy, and reduce anxiety and flu-like symptoms. It is in the middle of the foot. The best way to massage it is by rolling the arch of the foot over a tennis ball on the floor. Rolling the entire foot over the tennis ball is also beneficial.



Pressure point: large intestine 4

Pressure on this point can stimulate intestinal activity, possibly easing constipation. It is found by massaging the muscle between the thumb and forefinger.



Resources

These organisations provide reliable information about massage and complementary therapies.

Australian

Association of Massage Therapists
Call (02) 9517 9925 or visit www.amt-ltd.org.au

Australian Association of Massage Therapists
Call 1300 138 872 or visit www.aamt.com.au

Australian Natural Therapists Association
Call 1800 817 577 or visit www.anta.com.au

Australian Traditional-Medicine Society
Call (02) 9809 6800 or visit www.atms.com.au

International

American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org

Macmillan Cancer Support
www.cancerbackup.org.uk

Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20

For support and information on cancer and cancer-related issues, call the Cancer Council Helpline, which is staffed by specialised oncology health professionals. You can also request services in languages other than English. This is a free and confidential service available Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

Cancer Council Helpline (cost of a local call)
13 11 20

TTY for deaf and hearing-impaired
(02) 9334 1865

For further information, visit the website
www.cancercouncil.com.au.

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Cancer Council New South Wales

Cancer Council is the leading cancer charity in New South Wales. It plays a unique and important role in the fight against cancer through undertaking high-quality research, advocating on cancer issues, providing information and services to the public and patients, and raising funds for cancer programs.

This information sheet is funded through the generosity of the people of New South Wales. To make a donation to help defeat cancer, visit Cancer Council's website at www.cancercouncil.com.au or phone 1300 780 113.

Before commencing any health treatment, always consult your doctor. This information sheet is intended as a general introduction to the topic and should not be seen as a substitute for your own doctor's or health professional's advice. All care is taken to ensure that the information contained here is accurate at the time of publication.

Cancer Council New South Wales
153 Dowling Street
Woolloomooloo NSW 2011

Cancer Council Helpline: 13 11 20
Telephone: (02) 9334 1900
Facsimile: (02) 9334 1741
Email: feedback@nswcc.org.au
Website: www.cancercouncil.com.au