

RESEARCH

Chronic Low Back Pain Eased by Massage

Massage is an effective treatment for chronic low back pain, according to a research study conducted by the Center for Health Studies in Seattle, Washington. In a comparison of massage, acupuncture and self-care, a 10-week program of massage therapy was found to be most effective of the three.

The study, "A Randomized Trial Comparing Acupuncture, Therapeutic Massage and Self-Care Education for Chronic Low Back Pain," was completed in late 2000.

Researchers compared the effects of acupuncture, massage and self-care education on 262 adults, aged 20 to 70. Participants in the massage group and the acupuncture group could have up to 10 sessions during the 10-week study period.

Those in the acupuncture group received acupuncture, electrical stimulation, heat, cupping, herbs and exercise suggestions.

Those in the massage-therapy group received a treatment protocol of therapies including Swedish and deep-tissue massage, trigger-point therapy, neuromuscular therapy and movement education.

Self-care participants were given two videos and a book with information about back pain, techniques to control and prevent pain, and suggestions for dealing with emotional problems that can accompany chronic pain.

Pre- and post-treatment assessments included: a Roland Disability Scale (a questionnaire that measures ability to function); SF-12 physical and mental health summary scales; exercise and worry level assessments; and estimates on care costs. Assessments were taken at intervals of four, 10 and 52 weeks.

Massage was found to be the most helpful therapy at the end of the 10-week treatment period, in all assessment criteria. Acupuncture ranked higher than self-care only in higher satisfaction with care and less use of pain medication at the end of 10 weeks.

After one year, those who had participated in the massage group still reported the greatest benefit from the 10-week treatment period, as compared to those who were in the acupuncture or self-care groups. Researchers also said there were noted improvements at the end of one year in the self-care group, in the areas of symptom, function and decreased worry about back problems.

"This study suggests that massage has benefits that become apparent within 10 weeks and persist at least one year," the researchers wrote. As well, those in the massage group had 40 percent fewer back-pain-related visits to a physician and 40 percent fewer medication refills than those in the other two groups.

"The finding that the benefits of massage persist well beyond the last treatment, and the suggestion of possible reductions in subsequent health care utilization, make massage a high priority for further study," the authors wrote.

- Source: *Group Health Cooperative of Puget Sound Center for Health Studies, Seattle, Washington. Authors: Daniel C. Cherkin, Ph.D.; David Eisenberg, M.D.; Karen J. Sherman, Ph.D.; William Barlow, Ph.D.; Ted J. Kaptchuk, O.M.D.; Janet Street, R.N., Richard A. Deyo, M.D. Originally published in Archives of Internal Medicine, April 23, 2001, Vol. 161, No.8.*