

# Press Gains

There's a confusing array of massage therapists competing to treat your aches and pains. **REBECCA CALDWELL** compares them

**F**ew things conjure up as luxuriant an image as a massage: low lights, soft music and strong hands melting away your aching muscles.

But massage shouldn't just be considered a hedonistic pleasure. It is increasingly being used as rehabilitative therapy. A recent report by the Fraser Institute estimates that 23 per cent of Canadians have used some type of bodywork to help restore or maintain health.

Primarily focusing on the soft issues in the body, applying touch not only relaxes an individual muscle, but has a host of positive side effects on the other parts of the body. Since massage triggers an increase in blood flow throughout the body, it can kick start things like the circulatory, digestive and hormonal systems. The Ontario Massage Therapist Association suggests that massage is good for relieving specific conditions such as repetitive-strain injury, headache, muscle strain and sprains and arthritis, and reducing stress and tension.

But just what constitutes a massage? There are myriad therapies out there and sometimes the task of picking the right one can be daunting. While one person might find Swedish massage soothing, some one else might prefer Shiatsu.

It's debatable to say which treatment is better than the other, says Laura McNelly, a registered massage therapist and naturopathic doctor who uses multiple types of massage in her practice in Toronto. Even more perplexing is that sessions of the same type of treatment might vary wildly from one practitioner to another.

Massage isn't appropriate for everyone. People with certain skin conditions, heart problems, acute illnesses or women who are pregnant should consult their doctors first.

As well, there is also some debate about whether people diagnosed with cancer should shy away from massage. While patients might benefit from the effects of touch, it has been suggested that there may be a risk of spreading the disease, especially after chemotherapy, although there has been no research to support this theory. Again, tell your therapist who will use different techniques to accommodate your condition.

And make sure you check your therapist's credentials. Anyone can call themselves a therapist, but most practitioners, like registered massage therapists, belong to licensing bodies or are certified by their training institutes.

## SWEDISH

When people think of massage, chances are they are thinking about Swedish massage. This is because the techniques of Swedish massage are often the basis of training in registered massage therapy schools.

While it's most commonly prescribed for rehabilitation, Swedish massage is usually associated with promoting relaxation. The treatment itself can vary between practitioners and can be gentle, firm, energizing or relaxing.

Typical techniques include effleurage, a long, gliding stroke usually moving toward the heart; petrissage, a movement that kneads the tissue; compression where a therapist applies pressure to a muscle; tapotement, which feels like percussion or tapping strokes; friction, where rubbing heats up the body; and vibration, where the body is gently stimulated by the therapist or by a machine.

For rehabilitation of specific ailments, a typical course of treatment runs from eight to 10 weekly sessions. However, most acolytes of Swedish massage therapy swear by monthly massages for stress reduction.

Swedish massage is also probably the most sensuous form of touch therapy. Because therapists use massage oils, so they can better apply long fluid strokes, this massage is conducted on a table with the client either naked or in underclothes only. If you're not really comfortable with the idea of being exposed, relax.

Therapists use sheets to drape parts of your body that they are not working on. To increase relaxation, lights are turned low and often therapists will play stress-busting meditative music.

## SHIATSU

One of the most popular forms of massage therapy is Shiatsu. Developed in Japan, there are actually two different schools in this form of bodywork, although they might feel very similar.

The first one, Masunaga, focuses not just on the physical body, but on a person's natural energy or chi. According to Shiatsu followers, this life force runs through the body on 14 meridians, and pain occurs when a pathway becomes blocked and obstructs the flow of the chi.

To get the chi back into balance, Masunaga, Shiatsu, uses acupuncture. The application of pressure with fingers, palms and elbow on



Massage is more than just a hedonistic specific points of the body. Similar to acupuncture, there are over 300 points on the body which regulate different organs and body functions. Sessions are usually performed with the client fully clothed and lying on a mat or massage table.

It is a preventative type of therapy, says Meredith Sands Keator, a certified practitioner in Toronto. "It's good for things like neck ache, backache, headache. A Shiatsu massage will leave you feeling relaxed and balanced. [It] lets you get your feet back on the ground."

Nankoshi Shiatsu, on the other hand, doesn't acknowledge the theory of meridians. Instead, it focuses on the body from a Western anatomical perspective, working with the neuromuscular system.



The brand name of structural integration is Roling, a technique developed by Dr. Ida Rolf that became trendy in the sixties and seventies. It's a type of therapy aimed at working the connective tissue with greater pressure and at deeper layers than a Swedish massage.

Roling has a reputation for being, well, painful. Mostly using compression strokes, Rolfers will often use their elbows and knees to apply pressure to the body, in addition to palms and forearms. While the day of treatments that would see a client burst into cathartic tears has passed, it is still intense, and some people might find it uncomfortable. Most Rolfers will modify the intensity to fit your endurance level, and breathing exercises during treatment can help.

It's not really used for relaxation or to fix specific things, but to build a better body," says Craig Mollins, a structural-integration practitioner in Toronto who has studied roling. "But it is also good for chronic pain and to promote general good health."

A standard course of treatment consists of the 10-session "Rolf recipe," each unit targeting a different part of the body. While Roling might be difficult during treatment, after a session you will feel relaxed and your posture will feel as if it's been realigned.

#### CRANIOSACRAL

Quickly gaining in popularity, the gentle techniques of craniosacral therapy seem very unlike traditional massage. Developed at the turn of the century by a British doctor, it came into its own in the seventies when a U.S. osteopath, Dr. John Upledger, noticed a regular rhythmic pulse in what he would term the craniosacral system. This system consists of the base of the skull, face, vertebrae and the sacrum (tailbone), as well as the meningeal membranes, connective tissue and the fluid cushioning the skull.

Occasionally, some believe, the pulse becomes blocked, usually because of muscle tension, and craniosacral therapists focus on removing or reducing this tension. A typical session may start with your practitioner taking your pulse by holding your feet, and then moving up to your torso, back, neck and head. The treatment usually takes place in a low-lit room while you are fully clothed on a massage table.

When the practitioner has found the obstruction, he or she will apply light pressure to the area, often simply by lifting a body part and letting gravity do the work. Some practitioners may add a psychological element, speaking to you to provoke free association and emotional release.

#### REFLEXOLOGY

An entire session of therapy devoted to your feet and hands may seem like the height of hedonism. But reflexology operates on the principle that your whole body is divided into 10 zones that correlate to points in your paws.

When these spots are manipulated, it can provide relief for a host of things like headache, acne and irritable-bowel syndrome. Applying pressure to your toes is supposed to stimulate your head and brain.

While some therapists feel it works along the same lines as Shiatsu, stimulating the flow of energy, others think it might trigger the release of pain-killing endorphins. It is often used in conjunction with other forms of massage therapy.

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A Namikoshi massage, however, sees the same techniques of manipulating pressure points.

#### HAIR MASSAGE

"It's kind of like passive yoga," says Ms. McNelly, who also practices hair massage. "You can't just zone it like in a Swedish massage. It's relaxing, but you'll feel alert." Hair massage is performed while you're clothed on a floor mat. It's all done on a head that works like a Shiatsu in that it works along energy meridians and activates pressure points to release congestion of energy, felt as muscle tension. The therapist will move your body, taking limbs just to the end of their range of motion and then stretch them a bit further. Ms. McNelly states that while Thai

massage is good for injuries and back pain, it is often used to promote whole-body health.

#### ROLFING

Ever notice that you favour one leg a little more than the other, or that you stand with hips or shoulders at different levels? Bad posture can create undue stress on your body, resulting in severe muscle aches or even permanent injury.

The idea behind structural integration is reshaping the body to combat the toll that years of slouching, misuse and even simple gravity have taken on your body by manipulating the muscles and the connective tissue (fascia) at its deepest level, the body is supposed to re-establish its natural balance.