



Things to Think About!

Massage Therapy for Individuals With Medical Needs and Disabilities By Heidi Van Etten, LMT

Massage therapy, what is it? Massage therapy is a type of soft tissue manipulation that includes rubbing, kneading, pressing, tapping and vibration on the muscles, using the massage therapist's hands, to promote well being. Not just a service found in high dollar spas this discipline has shown to be beneficial in the treatment of many ailments and injuries.

Some of the benefits include: increased blood and lymph circulation, increased range of motion, stimulate (but not strengthen) weak muscles, positively affect the central nervous system, reduce aches and pains, can prevent or delay muscle atrophy and contractures due to inactivity and muscle tightness, and reduce stress.

There are several different types of massage. A massage therapist may also be trained in other types of therapies such as craniosacral therapy, a relatively new discipline involving a soft touch treatment that positively affects the central nervous system or reflexology, a type of treatment that focuses on the feet, hands and ears.

Who specifically can benefit from massage?

Almost anyone can benefit from massage. General massage benefits people who suffer from chronic pain, tight muscles or increased muscle tone or low muscle tone and stress. People with repetitive movement problems such as wringing, rocking and other types of nervous movements, and people who suffer from excitability problems such as outbursts and inability to calm are great candidates for both general massage and craniosacral massage.

Where to look for a massage therapist?

This depends a lot on the type of massage you need and who is trained and available in your area. You

need to know what type of massage you are looking for. Do you need therapeutic massage for the treatment of hypertonic muscles? To treat an injury? Or to assist an individual with autism in calming and relaxing? Ask around, or call different establishments to find out what they offer. Chiropractor and physical therapy offices are often a good place to start. Many doctors are beginning to refer patients to massage therapy as well. Spas can be a good reference resource too, but make sure that you are getting the treatment you need from a properly trained and certified therapist and that you're not just paying for a lot of fluff. Always make sure that the therapist has been properly trained in the type of massage you need and the establishment can accommodate your special needs

How to find a qualified massage therapist who can properly deal with your specific condition?

Ask questions and make sure the massage therapist fully understands your needs and can really address the types of problems that you have. Find someone who is willing to listen and work with you. Make sure they are fully and currently licensed in your area. Call your state's licensing board to find out if a therapist is licensed and certified in your state. Therapists should also be certified in the treatments they are offering. Most massage therapists learn the basics of many different types of massage while in school and can "sort of" do the treatments. However, other massage disciplines, such as craniosacral massage, often take extra time and training to certify in a specific treatment – sometimes years. Keep in mind that opportunities for massage therapists to learn about special needs and medical massage have not been readily available, so most them don't have a lot of background. It's preferred, but not necessary to have a background in working with special needs. With so many different types of disorders, injuries and illnesses, there is no way for a massage therapist to know everything. It is important for therapists to spend a lot of time asking questions and researching disorders so that treatments provided are appropriate.

Questions to ask/topics to discuss before beginning massage therapy

- Make sure the therapist understands the disorder and how it specifically affects the client.
- If possible, do some research on your own to find out which treatments you think would be best? Talk to the massage therapist, and your doctor, about your ideas for treatment and reasons for them. Find out what the therapist thinks would work well too.
- Ask about contraindications. For example, craniosacral is great for most people – except those with Down syndrome or acute head injuries.
- Specifically why is massage needed and **what are the goals?** Examples of goals could be to reduce stress, prevent contractures, increase range of motion, or ease pain.
- Talk to the therapist about the whole problem to be sure that you are getting the proper treatment. For example: Are the problems area specific or do they affect the whole body? Was there trauma involved? Are you looking at massage helping with one specific problem, or working on the body as a whole, everything little by little?

Just because someone has special needs does not mean that massage is the best option. What works for one person may not work for another. So being specific as to what you need and what your goals are will greatly impact the treatments given and how effective the treatments are.

How frequently will the person be treated and for how long?

This really needs to be discussed with both your doctor and massage therapist. Often you will need a prescription from the doctor for the massage. If a prescription is needed, the doctor may decide how often treatments should be given. Typically most special needs clients are seen once a week or every other week. However, the frequency of treatments may depend not just on the needs of the client, but on the funding source, program requirements and limitations, and time available.

The number of treatments and duration also depend on what the individual's goals are. Someone being seen for an injury or specific problem area that will eventually go away with treatment may only be seen for a few short visits, while someone who has a chronic condition with no cure might be seen once a week as long as the treatment makes sense, which may be many years.

State Licensure

Each state has its own requirements. Some states require insurance companies to cover massage prescribed by a doctor, but here in Utah, massage is not covered by insurance companies unless you've been in a car accident. Massage therapy services can be picked up as part of a Medicaid waiver program if funding is available for the individual. You can talk to your support coordinator to find out if massage is available and a good fit for your situation. If it is, get a prescription from the doctor and use a massage therapist who is approved (or contracted by the state) to provide services with the Department of Services for People with Disabilities.

Massage therapy can be a very beneficial service for people with special needs. Not only does it feel great but it can also greatly improve health and quality of life.

***Editor's Note:** Over the last several years massage therapy has become a more accepted mainstream medical discipline. Specially trained massage therapists can now be found in hospitals, clinics, therapy centers and rehabilitation facilities all over the country providing a wide range of therapeutic massage services. In the state of Utah massage therapy has become available to individuals eligible for Medicaid Waivers as long as the treatment has been prescribed by the individual's physician and a state contracted therapist provides the service. Contact your DSPD Case Coordinator to see if you qualify.

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