

Massage: It's real medicine

By Kristyn Kusek Lewis
Health.com

Having your honey rub your back is sweet, but it's tough to compete with the hands of a pro. A good massage therapist can make you feel like a new person. And now research suggests massage can ease insomnia, boost immunity, prevent PMS, and more. Maybe that's why hospitals are making it a standard therapy.

"All of our surgery patients are offered the treatment -- I call it 'service with a smile' -- and it's a mandatory weekly prescription I give myself," says Mehmet C. Oz, M.D., director of the Cardiovascular Institute at New York Presbyterian Hospital--Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center and a member of the board at LLuminari, a health-education company.

Our advice: Enjoy your hands-on time with your sweetie, but set aside some time for a real massage, too. Here are some feel-good reasons:

Goodbye, pain

It sounds like a no-brainer, but rubdowns are especially effective for aches like low-back pain. Researchers at the Group Health Center for Health Studies in Seattle, Washington, found that massage works better than common treatments including chiropractic therapy and acupuncture. It's not clear why, but several studies show massage reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol while boosting the feel-good hormones serotonin and dopamine. Those changes slow your heart rate, reduce blood pressure, and block your nervous system's pain receptors. Massage also increases blood flow to the muscles, which may help them heal. ([Health.com: Frequently asked questions about massage](#))

A bonus: Massage also seems to ease distress from migraine, labor pain, and even cancer, as well as the body tenderness seen with fibromyalgia, says Tiffany Field, Ph.D., director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine. Plus, the benefits may last as long as a year after just a few treatments, says Partap Khalsa, Ph.D., a chiropractor and a program officer at the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, the agency funding many major studies on massage.

Hello, dreams

Fluctuations in several types of brain waves either relax you or wake you up. Massage increases delta waves -- those linked with deep sleep -- according to a study at the Touch Research Institute. That's why it's easy to drift off on the massage table, Field says.

Nice to have you back, brain power

The Touch Research Institute study that connected massage to sleep also found that a 15-minute chair massage boosted alertness. "Subjects reported that it felt like a runner's high," Field says. Tests also show that brain-wave activity stimulated by massage is linked to improved attention.

Take that, colds

Massage helps ward off bugs by boosting your "natural killer cells," the immune system's first line of defense against invading illness. "We know that cortisol destroys natural killer cells," Field says. "Therefore, since massage decreases cortisol, your immune cells get a boost." Massage even seems to boost immunity in those people with severely compromised immune systems, such as breast-cancer patients. ([Health.com: Which massage is best for you?](#))

Blues, be gone

Less cortisol and more serotonin and dopamine in your system may also mean less stress, anxiety, and depression. "We know that the right side of the frontal lobe of the brain is more active when we're sad, and the left side's activated when we're happy," Field says. "Our studies have observed that massage decreases activity in the right lobe and increases functioning in the left." The well-being people feel after a massage is a big reason why some hospitals offer it to anxious patients preparing for surgery and cancer patients going through chemo.

Shove off, PMS

A small study of 24 women with severe PMS found that massage reduced symptoms such as pain, water retention, and mood swings. Try it with proven remedies such as exercise (and who-cares-if-they-work solutions like a little dark chocolate).

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