Have You Tried Massage Therapy to Help Ease the Symptoms of Fibromyalgia?

by MARIANNE BROWN

The Benefits of Massage for Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is a chronic (long-term) condition, producing a wide range of symptoms, the main ones being:

- Widespread pain
- Headaches
- Muscle tension and stiffness
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbances
- Gastrointestinal issues

It is a challenging condition to treat; conventional medicine focuses on treating the symptoms, as the cause has still not been defined.

Many of us have turned to complimentary treatments to help us improve our quality of life. Massage can be very effective in helping some of the symptoms of Fibromyalgia.

Why Try Massage as a Treatment?

When you think of something to help you relax, one of your top five may be a massage. It certainly has always been in my top three.

“Massage can bring a lot of benefits to Fibromyalgia patients in terms of alleviating the pain and discomfort associated with the condition,” says Salifou N. Bishop, a licensed clinical massage therapist at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, who treats people with Fibromyalgia.

Stress is one of the leading causes of flare-ups, and tends to manifest into symptoms of pain, fatigue, muscle stiffness and gastrointestinal issues. Massage can help you relax, and it can also be used as a reward after a long day.

Some of you may have tried a massage since developing this condition and now find it uncomfortable. I know I did at first. I had been having massages for years, pre-fibromyalgia. But it does ease. Honest communication with the massage therapist is vital to reduce sensitivity.

There are a multitude of qualified practitioners of this ancient technique that can perform different styles, to suit your individual needs.

Potential Benefits

Reduction in Pain and Muscle Tension

Massage can minimalize the intensity of widespread pain and possibly reduce the flu-type feeling. Although massage can initially increase this, I find this subsides by the next day. Generally, you can experience a reduction in tension pain in areas such as the upper back, neck and shoulders.

Decrease Pain in Tender Points

Massage can reduce swelling and pain in your tender points.

Increase Feel Good Hormones

The autonomic nervous system stimulates the release of endorphins, serotonin and dopamine neurotransmitters. These give you the feeling of happiness, anxiety relief and a sense of well-being.

Decrease Stress Hormone Cortisol

The most common benefits of decreased cortisol include:

- Increased healing
- Decreased stress
- Relaxation

Improved Sleep

If you are more relaxed and in less pain, then you may sleep better, especially by being able to achieve a deeper sleep.

Decrease in Substance P Levels

When these levels are high, it increases or heightens sensitivity to pain and other stimulus, such as environmental factors.

Digestion Improvement

All over body massage can increase waste removal from the body, reducing pain and increasing ease of food digestion.

Potential Risks

There are few documented risks in terms of massage therapy for Fibromyalgia, but here is a list I have put together myself, based on my own experiences:

- Increase in widespread pain: when I first had regular massages again after developing Fibromyalgia, I noticed that the ‘flu-type’ feeling tends to get worse in the hours following the massage. But, by the next day, I find this dramatically eases and continues to do so.
- Increased localized pain: depending on the length of time, depth and technique of your therapist, certain areas can increase in pain, usually over the next few days. However, over time, you and your therapist will learn what works well and which areas need a gentler technique.
- Gastrointestinal changes: you may potentially increase the need to use the bathroom, as well as gas production (the masseuse will be used to this, and it is perfectly normal).

Types of Massage and Intended Results

Myofascial Release

This type of massage treats muscle pain and stiffness by relaxing contracted muscles, improving blood flow and stimulating the muscle “stretch reflex". This technique can be active (patient provides resistance) or passive (patient stays relaxed).

Connective Tissue Massage

This type of massage uses slower strokes with more pressure, releasing deeper layers of muscle and fascia (connective tissue).

Shiatsu

This method involves applying pressure to specific points on the body, relieving tension. According to this Japanese healing treatment, these are located along energy pathways, called meridians.

Manual Lymphatic Drainage

Gentle massage aids in the natural drainage of lymphatic fluid, which is responsible for circulating through the body’s lymph system, carrying waste products away from the tissues and back toward the heart. This massage uses rhythmic motions to get the lymph fluid moving.

Trigger Point Therapy

Trigger points are painful spots located in bands of muscle fibers. Once these areas have been identified, this method involves deactivating trigger points using finger pressure.

Swedish Massage

This type of massage combines kneading, gliding/sliding, beating and friction, all allowing fresh blood to reach areas of the body that have been nutritionally starved and deprived of nutrients and oxygen. It also aids relaxation and stress relief.

Hot-Stone Massage

This method involves the placing of heated, smooth and flat stones on key points of the body and uses them as massage tools.

Passive Stretching

This involves exerting an external force on a limb to move it into a new position. By gently moving arms and legs in the same direction, we can loosen up those muscles and joints.

Sports Massage

Often used before or after an athletic event, this type of massage can alleviate stress and tension that build up in the body’s soft tissues during physical activity.

Should I Speak to my Medical Practitioner First?

As an example, I have a serious spinal disability and three metal cages in my spine. Therefore, I have been advised by my doctor to avoid chiropractic and sport massage (I really should have checked with my doctor first), due to the ongoing problems I have in my spine.

If you are concerned, then I am sure your doctor will be able to advise you on the best course of action and put your mind at ease. Massage should not be painful. Although you may find you are a little sensitive at first, this should pass as you get used to it. It did for me, and I would not miss my regular massage for anything.