

CHAPTER 8: MASSAGE, MANIPULATION AND OTHER THERAPIES

Most complementary therapies for pain relief don't involve taking herbs or nutritional supplements. There are many other philosophies of healing, as well as treatments performed by practitioners of these philosophies, that are increasing in popularity for people with chronic pain.

Some of these treatments rise from ancient healing traditions in China or India. Others stem from relatively recent health philosophies. No matter how old or new these complementary treatments are, they tend to spark controversy, as well as debate among doctors and their patients.

No matter what therapy you try, it's important to find out if the practitioner is a member of the relevant professional society (see the Resources section) and has the proper training to perform the procedures. Never allow a practitioner who is not properly licensed to perform any type of manipulation or treatment on your body. You should agree on fees and terms beforehand so you will know what charges you will owe for these services.

Consult your GP also so he knows what therapies you are exploring. In some cases, your doctor can refer you to reputable, qualified practitioners of various therapies. Some doctors also perform these therapies as part of their integrative practice. In addition, some physiotherapists, occupational thera-

pists or other health-care professionals may offer some of these services.

ACUPUNCTURE AND ACUPRESSURE

Acupuncture is an ancient, Asian healing technique that has gained popularity in the West over the past few decades. Mainstream medical institutions now take acupuncture seriously and are studying the therapy to determine why and how well it works. Many UK national charities and research organizations have funded research on acupuncture to explore its effectiveness.

Acupuncture is part of *Chinese medicine*. Chinese medicine, which may also involve herbs, massage, meditation techniques or exercises, developed over thousands of years in China, but has gained new popularity in the West in recent years. One of the main reasons people seek acupuncture treatment is to relieve chronic pain, especially back pain, arthritis or fibromyalgia. Currently, a number of scientific studies are being conducted to research the effectiveness and safety of acupuncture treatment specifically for osteoarthritis and other diseases involving chronic pain.

Acupuncture involves a trained professional puncturing the skin with very thin needles at any of 300 specific sites on the body. These points lie along energy pathways called

meridians. Devotees of acupuncture believe that the placement of needles at these points will increase the energy flow (called qi; pronounced *chee*) along the meridians. Qi is, in traditional Chinese belief, essential to healthy balance in the body, known as yin and yang. *Acupressure* is another form of this treatment, but one involving hand pressure rather than needle punctures.

Acupuncture supposedly boosts the body's natural ability to heal itself and relieve pain.

Studies about acupuncture have found some merit to these claims. They find that some people have higher levels of endorphins, those natural pain-fighting chemicals the body produces, in their cerebrospinal fluid after acupuncture.

Scientists do not yet understand why pricking the skin at these particular points causes the endorphin boost, or why acupuncturists place their needles in one part of the body to get pain relief in another part. Acupuncture may stimulate the flow of electromagnetic signals through the body along the meridians, helping endorphins flow. Acupuncture may also activate the release of the central nervous system's natural opiates (similar to the chemicals in opiate drugs), which relieve pain. Or it may aid in the release of certain neurotransmitters, body chemicals that play a role in how the brain relays pain messages, and *neurohormones*, brain chemicals that can affect the function of the body's organs.

More scientific studies are necessary if acupuncture is to be established as a pain-relief treatment, but the procedure may well provide

relief from many painful conditions, including headache, tennis elbow, fibromyalgia, myofascial pain, osteoarthritis, low back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome and more. Most doctors who support the use of acupuncture believe it should be used as a complement to regular medical treatment of chronic pain. Many countries have licensing boards that license acupuncturists and other individuals who practise 'healing arts' to perform treatments. In the UK, consult the British Acupuncture Council (see the Resources section for their details).

What Happens During Acupuncture? During an acupuncture session, the practitioner (known as an acupuncturist) will take a medical history and examine you (particularly your pulses and your tongue) to help him make a traditional Chinese medicine diagnosis. He will then select a number of points on your body to use in your treatment. Using a new sterile needle each time, the acupuncturist will insert the needles and leave them there while you lie on a table for about 20 minutes. He may rotate the needles during this time – a practice thought to achieve greater effect. (In acupressure, he applies pressure, not needles, to these points.) Some acupuncturists also use electrical stimulation of the needles to boost the procedure's effects, a procedure known as *electroacupuncture*. Others use dried herbs as part of their treatment of the patient, a practice called *moxibustion*.

The acupuncturist will then remove the needles and will probably ask you to rest some more before rising from the table. Reactions to

the procedure vary widely from person to person. You may feel light-headed or drowsy, so you should not drive yourself home from your first session. Usually, repeated treatments are needed for relief of chronic pain.

To find an acupuncturist in your area, first ask your doctor for a referral. If he cannot give you any information, consult the British Acupuncture Council, the national body that certifies acupuncturists. (See the Resources section for contact details.)

Acupressure. Acupressure is a massage-like technique where the practitioner presses on particular points of the body in an attempt to relieve pain that may occur in other areas of the body. According to the theory behind the therapy, these acupoints occur on energy pathways, or meridians, as in acupuncture, and the therapy is designed to restore proper energy flow and balance to relieve pain.

MANIPULATION THERAPIES

One popular treatment for pain relief, particularly of chronic neck and back pain or post-injury pain, is *manipulation therapy*, or manual adjustment of the spine or the limbs in order to restore proper alignment or promote the body's natural healing ability. Many different health-care professionals perform manipulation therapy, and the therapy they offer may vary slightly from discipline to discipline. Chiropractors are probably the most common practitioners of this therapy, but osteopaths, physiotherapists and even some doctors may also perform it.

Chiropractic and Osteopathy

Chiropractic is a system that holds that pain and many other health problems, including minor and serious diseases, occur because the body's spine is out of alignment. Chiropractors perform regular adjustments to the spine, or *spinal manipulations*, in order to restore the spine to its optimal position. According to the philosophy of chiropractic, a well-adjusted spine allows the body to perform its natural defences of pain and disease at optimal levels.

Whilst there is dispute among scientists as to the validity of the theory of chiropractic, many people seek chiropractors and other health-care professionals for periodic or regular spinal manipulation as a therapy for pain. Whether or not the therapy works, or whether or not the overall philosophy behind it is valid, is a matter of opinion at this point.

Chiropractic began in 1895 in Iowa, when a lay healer named David Daniel Palmer formed the basic theory of what was then called vertebral subluxations. His treatment philosophy spread.

In the UK, chiropractors are registered with the General Chiropractic Council, the statutory body for regulating the profession. Over 50 per cent of chiropractors are represented by the British Chiropractic Association (BCA); they will have undergone a four-year full-time internationally accredited degree course. Chiropractors cannot prescribe drugs or perform surgery, but they do consult with patients and perform manipulation and other treatments.

Osteopathy was founded in the 19th century, by a US Civil War surgeon named Andrew Still, who was disillusioned by the failures of the mainstream medicine of his time. He devised his own theory that the body's musculoskeletal system was key to good health and the body's ability to defend itself against disease and to heal itself following injury.

Osteopathy uses many of the same practices and follows many of the same principles as traditional or allopathic medicine. In the examination room, osteopathic treatment may be quite similar to examinations by a doctor. However, osteopaths may focus more on general health and wellness practices, as well as addressing the home and work environment of the patient.

As osteopathic medicine is based on the idea that the musculoskeletal system is at the root of many diseases and pain conditions, osteopaths receive additional training in treating the musculoskeletal system. Their treatment may include *osteopathic manipulative treatment*, using their hands on the body of the patient in an effort to diagnose disease, damage to tissues and more. Treatment may also include manipulation, where the osteopath uses his hands more forcefully to correct problems in the musculoskeletal system.

What Happens During Manipulation Therapy? Manipulation therapy usually follows a consultation with the practitioner. He may determine your range of motion (the amount of flexibility you have in certain

joints), muscle tone or strength, reflexes and more. Then, the practitioner might perform the manipulation therapy, along with prescribing treatments and suggestions, such as exercise or dietary changes.

Spinal manipulation involves the practitioner using either his hands or a small pushing instrument to press on the spine, back and neck or, sometimes, the limbs. The manipulation often looks as if they are pushing or stretching your neck and back into alignment, while you lie on your stomach on a padded table. You may hear a crack or pop, but this is simply air being released from the moving vertebrae. The practitioner may get you to rest for a few moments after the manipulation.

Study results and professional opinions are mixed on the benefit of spinal manipulation therapy for people with chronic pain. You may have to rely on your own judgement as to whether this therapy is worth trying. If you try spinal manipulation therapy and do not see some relief after three or four sessions, it probably isn't going to work. You may receive some pain relief from the manipulations, but if you don't see improvement, try massage, water therapy, exercise or other techniques instead.

Be wary of any practitioner who claims that continual manipulations throughout your lifetime are necessary to achieving pain relief and good health; there is no evidence to support this claim. Also, be wary of any practitioner who suggests that you discontinue any other medical treatment or seeing your medical doctors for care.

Although it's likely that spinal manipulation is safe, people with inflammatory arthritis or osteoporosis should use caution because manipulation might damage weakened joints or bones. Fracture of bones can occur. It's essential to inform your chiropractor, osteopath, physiotherapist or any other spinal manipulation practitioner about your health conditions. Don't just say, 'I'm in pain.' Practitioners need to know any possible health problems you may have in order to perform manipulation properly. If manipulation causes pain, stop the treatment and inform the practitioner.

Your doctor should be able to refer you to a qualified practitioner of manipulation therapy in your area. Chiropractors and osteopaths are required by law to be registered with the relevant regulatory body: the General Chiropractic Council and the General Osteopathic Council Association.

Craniosacral Therapy

A similar form of manipulation therapy, although one less widely practised, is *craniosacral therapy*. This therapy aims to balance the fluids in what practitioners term the craniosacral system – the fluids that run down your spinal cord from the brain to the base of the spine. Practitioners and devotees believe an imbalance in this fluid can cause various health problems, including pain.

In craniosacral therapy, the practitioner stands behind you while you lie on a comfortable table, and gently holds your head in his hands while applying soft pressure to various

points on the back of the neck. He may also apply gentle pressure to points at the base of the spine. Experts are very divided on the validity or usefulness of this procedure. Some people find it beneficial or relaxing.

Some chiropractors and osteopaths perform *cranial manipulation*, in which they apply gentle pressure to the skull in certain areas in order to relieve pain. They use the heels of their hands and press on particular points of the skull. Some professionals use this technique to relieve chronic neck and back pain, ear pain, and even *tinnitus* (a chronic ringing or buzzing in the ears). Some of these practitioners believe that the cranial manipulation doesn't relieve the pain, but corrects misalignment of the skull's bones (which actually don't move) so the body's natural defence system can work more effectively.

MASSAGE

Massage is a common procedure used by many people who are not in chronic pain but enjoy the soothing action of massage for stress relief or improvement in flexibility. But many people use massage for pain relief, and studies show that this is an effective, safe therapy when administered by a qualified professional. Massage therapists are plentiful and located in almost every area, and their fees should be affordable.

'Massage' is a common term and there are several different types of massage. In a nutshell, massage is the manual manipulation and kneading of soft tissues, particularly muscles. Massage's benefits include improved blood

circulation, relaxation of tense muscles, improved range of motion and increased endorphin levels – all of which may benefit people with chronic pain. Massage may enable you to feel more flexible and relaxed, so you sleep better and are more able to exercise regularly to maintain good health.

Below is a rundown of the different types of massage therapy. Ask your doctor or physiotherapist to suggest what type of massage is appropriate for your type of pain.

Swedish massage. This is the most common form of massage, and the form most people think of when they hear ‘massage’. Swedish massage therapists knead the top layers of muscles of the body, often applying lotion or oil to ease their hand movements. Swedish massage usually lasts between 30 minutes and an hour. Some sessions are relaxing and others involve harder, more vigorous pressing designed to loosen tense muscles.

Deep tissue massage. This type of massage therapy involves a deeper, harder pressing by the therapist in order to release tension in the deepest layers of soft tissue. Therapists might use their fingers, elbows or thumbs to press between layers of muscles and get to the sources of pain or tension. Some people may experience soreness after the first few sessions, but later may find relief of nagging pain, such as low back pain or arthritis.

Trigger point therapy or neuromuscular massage. Trigger points are painful or tense

points in the body that may be triggering pain elsewhere. In order to release the muscle tension that may be causing pain, practitioners use their fingers to press deeply into the body and massage those points. Some people with fibromyalgia find this therapy useful for temporary pain relief, but it can be a painful experience for others.

Myofascial release massage. Myofascial pain is centred in the fascia – the fibrous, thin connective tissues beneath the skin, sheathing your muscles. In this massage therapy, practitioners gently massage and stretch the fascia in order to release tension in these structures. Typically, myofascial release therapy sessions last about 30 minutes, and don’t use oil as in Swedish massage. People with myofascial pain, as well as fibromyalgia and pain caused by tension or stress, may find relief with this therapy.

Oriental massage techniques. As we discussed on p. 140, many Oriental medicine practitioners perform techniques designed to restore the flow of qi in the body. *Shiatsu* massage is a Japanese technique that is gaining popularity in the West and is widely available at spas and health clubs where massage is offered. It’s similar to acupuncture because it aims to improve the flow of energy along the meridians. Sessions may take place on a table or a mat on the floor, and include stretching techniques as well.

A less widely practised Oriental massage technique is *tuina*, a Chinese therapy that includes massaging the body’s pressure points.

Rolfing. Rolfing (named for its inventor, Ida Rolf) involves a technique very similar to deep tissue massage, and the idea is that tightness in the fascia may be causing pain. Rolfing aims to release muscles and other soft tissues from the fascia so that the body can restore its natural healing ability, aiming more at body maintenance than treating disease. Usually, Rolfing therapy takes place in ten one-hour sessions held about a week apart.

Hellerwork is a similar, massage-based practice that also involves exercises and teaching the person better posture and movement techniques in order to prevent pain.

Skinrolling technique. Some people with fibromyalgia find pain relief from this type of massage. Skinrolling involves a therapist picking up a roll of the person's skin and moving it carefully back and forth across the fascia, the fibrous tissues underneath. This technique aims to break the connections between the tissue and the nerve endings under them that are communicating the pain messages. Skinrolling can be painful at first, so therapists may use a mild anaesthetic before the treatment. Some people have reported long-lasting relief from fibromyalgia pain after skinrolling, but others find the technique itself too painful.

Spray and stretch technique. This kind of massage is used by people with fibromyalgia and also by people experiencing chronic back pain. Experts are divided as to its validity. Spray and stretch is usually performed by a physiotherapist rather than a massage

therapist. The doctor or therapist sprays the skin over the painful area with a cooling anaesthetic, such as ethyl chloride, and then gently kneads the tense, painful muscles.

With any type of massage therapy, you should feel some relief after the session or at least in a few days. Most people who rely on massage therapy for pain relief schedule appointments regularly, as often as their doctor or physiotherapist might suggest.

To find a qualified therapist, ask your doctor for a referral, or consult a physiotherapy clinic or pain clinic in your area. If you use the services of a spa, make sure you check the credentials of the practitioners – they should be trained professionals. Be wary of so-called 'massage parlours' or 'health spas', which may offer cheaply priced massages performed by untrained people.

You can also perform your own massage to certain areas of the body that may be painful, such as wrists, arms, legs, feet, neck or shoulders. It may be difficult for you to reach your own back, but you may be able to massage your own lower back. Massage devices are available at many shops. These devices can help you massage sore joints or muscles, and some can apply soothing heat as well.

Reflexology

Somewhat similar to massage but more focused on a specific area of the body, *reflexology* is a pain-relief technique that is more akin to acupuncture than traditional Swedish, full-body massage.