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Low back pain: Can massage help?



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Pain in the lower (lumbar) back is the most common form of back pain. It is sometimes called lumbago. Most of the time, low back pain improves so much on its own within a few weeks that people can return to everyday activities. But back pain can also be very disabling, and become a chronic physical and psychological burden.

Pain in any part of the back can be caused by problems affecting the bones, muscles or nerves of the spine. For example, tense muscles can irritate nerves and lead to pain which may be felt in other parts of the body, like the legs (sciatic pain). Bad posture or damage to a spinal disc can cause back pain too.

But very often the cause is not clear. This is called “non-specific back pain”. Back pain is a very individual matter and can have many causes. People can have no sign of anything wrong and still be in pain – while others can show signs of wear and tear in their back on an x-ray, and have no pain whatsoever.

Back pain is classified according to how long it lasts:

- Acute back pain – less than 6 weeks
- Sub-acute back pain – between 6 and 12 weeks
- Chronic back pain – longer than 12 weeks

In rare cases, back pain could be a sign of more serious health problems. These may then be accompanied by other symptoms, such as numbness, paralysis, weakness, tingling sensations or bladder and bowel movement problems. If you have one of these symptoms, it is important to see a doctor soon.

Treatment options

People often use pain-relieving tablets or are given an injection for the pain. Surgery is rarely used to treat non-specific back pain. Other options include exercises, relaxation techniques, learning about taking care of the back, physiotherapy, chiropractic treatment, applying heat or cold, acupuncture, liniments or medicated ointments, and movement therapies like the Alexander Technique.

Some people also use cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). That is a type of psychological treatment that can be used to teach people ways to cope with pain and stress.

Massage is a traditional back pain treatment. Massage therapy aims to relieve pain, relax muscles and achieve a sense of wellbeing. It is meant to reduce muscle stiffness that might be responsible for the pain, and make the muscles more flexible. There are several theories about how massage might work. One theory is that it triggers the release of pain-relieving substances, so-called endorphins, in the brain. Other theories suggest that massage therapy stimulates the nervous system in ways that relieve pain.

There are many forms of massage. Widely used forms include classic (Swedish) massage, Thai massage and acupressure. They differ in terms of the hand movements used, the parts of the body that are massaged, the amount of pressure applied, and the instruments and parts of the body that the massage therapist might use. The different massage types are also based on different theories about what causes back pain. You can read more about different forms of massage here (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.629.en.html>)

Research results: massage therapy could help relieve longer-lasting pain

Researchers from the Cochrane Collaboration – an international network of researchers – analysed trials which tested the effect of massage therapy for non-specific low back pain. They looked for trials that compared massage therapy with a dummy treatment, no treatment or a different treatment. You can read about why it is important to do trials in this way to find out whether a health care intervention works here (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/evidence-based-medicine>). The researchers wanted to know how massage therapy affected pain, general wellbeing, back-specific function, quality of life and overall mobility.

The researchers found 13 trials, but they were mostly very small trials. They concluded that 5 of the trials, involving just under 670 people, could provide sound scientific results. These trials covered very different types of massage, and people had had their back pain for different lengths of time. So the trials could not provide a single strong answer to most questions.

The researchers report that the trials suggest a combination of massage and exercises is probably more effective than doing one of these things alone. The people who had massages as well as exercises and stretching, for example, were more mobile and had less pain in the short and long term.

Not yet clear which types of massage might be best

The researchers pointed out that the main goal of massage therapy can be very different. For example, some therapists are aiming to help the person (and their muscles) relax, while others are more focused on stretching or working on the body in other ways. Although the trials studied various massage techniques, there were not enough comparisons of treatments to show which forms of massage might be the most worthwhile for people with different problems.

Many of the treatments had mixtures of several elements – like massage oils, stretching, and more than one type of massage technique. The researchers concluded that acupuncture (by hand or using an instrument to apply the pressure) may be particularly effective, but more research is needed to be sure.

Based on the small amount of research so far, it seems that Thai massage achieves similar results to classic massage techniques. However, foot reflexology massage does not appear to relieve back pain or improve mobility.

The people in the trials did not have any serious adverse effects. Some reported having pain during or shortly after treatment. And some had an allergic reaction to a massage oil and got a rash.

It is not known in what way the massage therapists' training and experience affects the success of treatment or how long (or how often) the massage sessions should ideally be. The most suitable form of massage for an individual will depend on many factors, including their symptoms, general physical condition and personal preferences.

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Glossary

Cochrane Collaboration

The Cochrane Collaboration is an international network of thousands of researchers and others. They work together in teams called Cochrane Review Groups to answer questions about health care by doing systematic reviews of evidence. To achieve this, the members of the Collaboration have developed systems and methods for systematically finding and analysing the results of trials of health care interventions. The goal of the Cochrane Collaboration is to help patients, health care practitioners and others make more informed decisions about health care. You can read more about the Cochrane Collaboration at their website.

acupuncture

Acupuncture is a complementary form of therapy used in traditional Chinese medicine. A doctor inserts thin needles at precisely defined points on the body. This is supposed to loosen what are thought to be blockages in the body or to stimulate or calm different organs.

Sources

IQWiG health information is based on research in the international literature. We identify the most scientifically reliable knowledge currently available, particularly so-called “systematic reviews”. These summarise and analyse the results of scientific research on the benefits and harms of treatments and other health care interventions. This helps medical professionals and people who are affected by the medical condition to weigh up the pros and cons. You can read more about systematic reviews and why these can provide the most trustworthy evidence about the state of knowledge here (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/evidence-based-medicine.61.en.html>) . The authors of the major systematic reviews on which our information is based are always approached to help us ensure the medical and scientific accuracy of our products.

Furlan AD, Imamura M, Dryden T, Irvin E. Massage for low-back pain. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2008, Issue 4. [Cochrane summary (URL: <http://mrw.interscience.wiley.com/cochrane/clsysrev/articles/CD001929/frame.html>)]

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You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at www.informedhealthonline.org

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