

Benefits of Massage for Patients with Breast Cancer

As is the case with the general population, breast cancer patients and survivors can take advantage of the many benefits of massage. Despite lingering fears among some people that massage may be harmful and spread cancer, there is no scientific evidence that this is the case. On the contrary, studies have shown that massage is safe, and hugely beneficial even in patients undergoing chemotherapy. The goal of massage therapy in oncology is to aid the patient to live better, feel better, improve their outcomes and be able to better navigate this life-threatening journey.

The benefits of massage for patients with breast cancer include:

1 Decreased anxiety and stress. Although increased levels of stress and anxiety may be beneficial in a fight or flight type situation, prolonged higher levels of anxiety (for example over weeks or months of treatment) can have a negative effect on your body. Stress increases cortisol levels, which in turn can weaken your immune system. Massage is proven to reduce cortisol levels and increase the release of serotonin – a happy hormone. Managing your stress levels will not only benefit your body during treatment and recovery but also your mind and emotions allowing you to better cope with your situation.

2 Improved mood. Depression is common among breast cancer patients, ranging from an occurrence of 25% to as high as 46%. Depression can negatively impact your quality of life, relationships, work and recreational environment and impact your ability to cope during treatment and recovery. Massage has been found to be effective in combating depression in breast cancer patients, by increasing serotonin,

dopamine, endorphins and oxytocin – those happy hormones. These hormones also promote better quality sleep, which in turn helps to improve mood and reduce depression.

3 Reduce fatigue. Fatigue is one of the most common side effects of cancer treatment. Depression and anxiety fuel those feelings of lethargy and fatigue. Massage is proven to improve fatigue by stimulating blood flow and oxygen around the body as well as releasing those 'feel-good' hormones.

4 Better immune function. Massage therapy has been shown to increase both natural killer cells and lymphocytes, which are white cells that are crucial to the immune system. This benefit may be particularly valuable to breast cancer patients and survivors. Natural killer cells are part of our innate immune system and help to control several types of tumours and microbial infections by limiting their spread and subsequent tissue damage.

5 Pain relief. Pain is a symptom present not only following surgery but can also be a chronic (long-term) issue for breast cancer survivors. Nerve and tissue damage can be the product of some cancer treatments, resulting in pain. Massage is proven to reduce pain by increasing endorphins, which are natural pain-relieving hormones.

6 Relaxation. This may seem like a superficial or flippant benefit compared with the many more urgent issues you may be dealing with when living with cancer. Dealing with a breast cancer diagnosis, anxiety, stress, depression, side effects from treatments, reduced activity as a result of treatment and fatigue and muscle tension all give you permission to selflessly enjoy the benefit of relaxation from massage. Relaxation is

'medicine' for your physical and mental health.

7 Nausea reduction in chemotherapy patients. Nausea is a common and major side effect of chemotherapy; however, research has shown that regular massage for short periods (20 minutes) during this time can significantly reduce the nausea effect.

There are different massage techniques that can be used. Some treatments may involve deeper myofascial massage techniques and stretching to restore full movement in your shoulder following mastectomy. Gentle lymphatic massage may facilitate drainage and reduce swelling in the arm. The warm touch of the hand triggers the healing process on many different levels: reducing fear, and acknowledging the scar. This can facilitate a re-connection to your body, creating a sense of calm, experiencing a feeling of being 'whole' again, possibly leading to outcomes including post-surgical body-image acceptance, a return of sensuality and even overcoming intimacy issues.

Massage promotes deep restoration and relaxation. The emphasis on an oncology massage session is placed on being fully present with your needs, allowing you to feel safe and nurtured and offering you a place to simply 'be'. Studies have shown that interventions to reduce a patient's psychological stress level may improve wound repair and recovery. Massage, of course, is well-established as a stress-relieving therapy. Other ways of boosting your feel-good hormones include getting outside in the sun, doing some exercise, laughing with a friend, listening to music, meditation or mindfulness, deep-breathing exercises and good quality sleep.

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