

Massage Therapy Review

MASSAGE FOUND TO BE BEST NON-DRUG TREATMENT IN SPINAL CORD INJURIES PAIN

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Budh C, Lundeberg T. Non-pharmacological pain-relieving therapies in individuals with spinal cord injury: a patient perspective. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 2004; 12:189 —197.

Introduction

There have been only a few studies into either drug or non-drug pain relief for sufferers of spinal cord injury. Indeed, non-drug treatments have been rarely discussed. Yet a recent study showed that a large proportion of people with disabilities have used complementary medicine. Thus a knowledge gap exists. To help fill in this gap, this Swedish study assessed the non-drug treatments used and 'preferred by patients with spinal cord injury and pain.'

Study Details

This study was set in Stockholm Sweden. The research commenced in 1999 by matching 123 patients with spinal cord injuries for gender, age, level of lesion and completeness of injury. Three years later, a follow up questionnaire revealed that 90 of these patients still experienced pain. These patients had a mean age of 53.4 years (range 27—83), with a mean time since injury of 14.4 years.

The questionnaires contained questions about present and former use of non-drug therapy and the present use of drug treatment for pain relief, as well as the effects of both types of treatment. Treatments listed in the questionnaires were TENS, acupuncture, massage therapy, heat and cold. Additionally, patients could nominate their own treatments, and nine patients added treatments that were characterised as mental training (relaxation, meditation and qi-gong) and physical training. Degrees of pain, life satisfaction, and anxiety and depression indicated by the patients responses were subsequently rated by the researchers in accordance with standard scales.

Fifty-seven patients had tried one or more non-drug therapy. Forty-four patients used drugs to relieve pain, and of these, 31 had also tried non-drug measures.

Results

In assessing the non-drug treatments that had a 'rather good' to 'very good effect', it was found that massage therapy had a success rate of 87%, followed by heat therapy with a success rate of 77%. Treatment with acupuncture and TENS each had a success rate of 28%.

Patients who described a 'rather good' to 'very good' pain relief effect from any treatment method tended to be younger and reported a lower general pain intensity than those who reported 'no effect' to 'insufficient'.

A further trend was that neuropathic pain (ie pain triggered by nervous system injury and referred to an area) sufferers gained less pain relief from opiates than did nociceptive pain (ie pain primarily due to tissue damage outside the nervous system) sufferers or those who likely experienced both neuropathic and nociceptive pain.

Another trend was that patients with cutting/stabbing pain and radiating pain responded better to acupuncture.

Limitations of the Study

The authors noted limitations in their study as being relatively small numbers, and that questionnaires were used instead of personal interviews (thus making misinterpretations more likely). Accordingly more thorough studies in a controlled environment are required.

Conclusion of the Researchers

The researchers concluded that:

Massage and heat were scored as giving best pain relief. Non-pharmacological treatments of spinal cord injuries pain may not only alleviate pain, but also improve mood and sleep.

Commentary

The authors concluded that non-drug and drug measures need to be combined in treating spinal cord injury pain.

The results of this study should reinforce the contribution of massage therapists in the management of spinal cord injury pain, as well indicate to practitioners not qualified in massage therapy to work together with massage therapists to obtain the best outcome for spinal cord injury patients. ❖

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