

Research: Massage for Spinal-Cord Injury

Massage benefits people with spinal-cord injuries by increasing their range of motion and muscle strength while decreasing anxiety and depression, according to a recent study.

“Spinal Cord Patients Benefit from Massage Therapy” was conducted by Miguel Diego, Tiffany Field, Ph.D., Maria Hernandez-Reif, Ph.D., Sybil Hart, Ph.D., and Tory Field, of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine, along with Bernard Brucker of the university’s psychiatry department and Iris Burman, co-founder and director of Educating Hands School of Massage in Miami, Florida.

Fifteen males and five females participated in the study. Their average age was 39 and each had C5-C7 spinal cord injuries for at least one year. The subjects were stratified by range of motion and randomly assigned to either a massage-therapy or exercise group.

The massage-therapy group received two 40-minute massages per week for five weeks. The exercise group was taught an exercise routine that they performed on their own twice a week for five weeks.

On the first and last days of the study, a physiotherapist with no knowledge of group assignment assessed participants’ range of motion and muscle strength, and administered the Modified Barthel Index, which rates self-care and mobility skills.

The massage group showed a greater increase in muscle strength than the exercise group on the Manual Muscle Test, designed to assess motor function after spinal-cord injury.

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The Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale was completed on the first and last days of the study, and the State Anxiety Inventory was used to assess participants’ anxiety immediately before and after massage on the first and last days of the study.

Members of the massage group showed a greater decrease in depression scores on the last day of the research. They also had significantly lower levels of anxiety than subjects in the exercise group

immediately following massage on the first and last days of the study.

“The increased muscle strength and range of motion may have contributed to the decrease in their depression and anxiety,” state the study’s authors. “These data suggest that patients with spinal cord injury can benefit from massage therapy.”

The authors recommended future studies to assess massage therapy for other problems related to spinal-cord injury, such as spasticity and pain. ■

—Source: The Touch Research Institute. Authors: Miguel A. Diego, Tiffany Field, Ph.D., Maria Hernandez-Reif, Ph.D., Sybil Hart, Ph.D. Originally published in the *International Journal of Neuroscience*, 2002, Vol. 112, pp. 133-142.

