

Health benefits of massage therapy demonstrated in new Buck Institute study

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Feb. 02--Taking your medicine may get a whole lot easier now that a Buck Institute for Research on Aging study has produced scientific evidence that a massage does indeed help heal sore and stressed muscles.

The study, produced jointly by the Buck Institute in Novato and McMaster University in Canada, appears in the Feb. 1 online edition of *Science Translational Medicine*. It shows that massage reduces inflammation, promotes the growth of new mitochondria in skeletal muscle and reduces muscle pain.

Researchers had 11 young men exercise to exhaustion on a stationary bicycle and then had one of the men's legs randomly selected to be massaged. The technique combined light stroking with firm compression. Biopsies were taken from both legs prior to the exercise, immediately after 10 minutes of massage treatment and after a 2.5-hour period of recovery.

"Before, it was difficult to sort out the psychological effects of massage," said Buck Institute faculty member Simon Melov, who was responsible for the genetic analysis of the tissue samples. "It's a pleasant feeling and relaxing. But now we know there is some cellular basis for the perceived beneficial effect.

"Our research showed that massage dampened the expression of inflammatory cytokines in the muscle cells and promoted biogenesis of mitochondria, which are the energy-producing units in the cells."

Melov explained, "When you over-exercise, which is what happens when you cause your muscles to adapt to a new workload, you make more mitochondria so your muscles can perform the increased workload."

He said that the pain reduction associated with massage may involve the same mechanism as those targeted by conventional anti-inflammatory drugs.

The article's lead author, Dr. Mark Tarnopolsky from the Department of Pediatrics and Medicine at McMaster University, said, "This study provides evidence that manipulative therapies, such as massage, may be justifiable in medical practice. The potential benefits of massage could be useful to a broad spectrum of individuals including the elderly, those suffering from musculoskeletal injuries and patients with chronic inflammatory disease."

Vajra Matusow, who founded the Diamond Light School of Massage and Healing Arts in San Anselmo in 1987, said, "It's absolutely wonderful that what massage therapists have known for decades is now being validated by the scientific community. I don't think any of us are surprised by it."

Mindy Zimmerman, a massage therapist who works at Marin General Hospital's Center for Integrated Health and Wellness, said, "I'm thrilled to see the medical research behind what we've intuitively suspected."

Zimmerman said health plans don't pay for the massage therapy she provides at the hospital; she hopes that research such as this will change that.

According to the study, about 18 million individuals undergo massage therapy annually in the United States, making it the fifth most widely used form of complementary and alternative medicine.

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