



The Spinal Column

Fibromyalgia and Massage Therapy

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Fibromyalgia is a chronic musculoskeletal condition, which causes widespread pain all over the body. This means it affects fibrous tissue, muscles, tendons, joints, and other connective tissues. Many more women than men are effected with Fibromyalgia.

Symptoms include difficulty sleeping, stiffness, achiness, headaches, abdominal discomfort, facial or jaw pain, chemical sensitivities, skin sensitivities, numbness and tingling sensations, and difficulty concentrating. Although many of us deal with one or more of these symptoms from time to time, fibromyalgia sufferers deal with many on an ongoing basis, without much relief. Doctors generally use 18 points on the body that have been mapped out to aid with diagnosis. When a minimum of 11 points are extremely tender to touch in combination with other symptoms a diagnosis is determined. In the past many people have suffered for years before a diagnosis was determined.

Fibromyalgia is sometimes categorized as primary or secondary; primary is the more common form. The causes of primary are unknown but could be attributed to a constellation of biological responses to stress in individuals who are more susceptible to such stress, because of personal histories or genetic factors. It has also been suggested that disturbed sleeping patterns may be the precipitating factor for many cases.

Secondary Fibromyalgia is caused by a specific problem

first, including injury, surgery, or specific disorders or diseases like ankylosing spondylitis. Some studies have shown that post-traumatic stress syndrome may play a role in the development for some patients. Brain scans of fibromyalgia patients have shown reduced blood flow to certain regions of the brain related to pain sensation, and studies of hormonal, metabolic, and brain chemical activity have shown a number of abnormalities as well. Secondary is much harder to treat than primary due to the extra underlying cause although the symptoms are identical. One study showed secondary fibromyalgia developed in 20% of patients who had suffered neck injuries.

Understanding the physiological effects of Fibromyalgia on the body will help you to appreciate why massage therapy can be an effective treatment. As we know, a major complaint of fibromyalgia sufferers is chronic aching primarily associated with the muscles. It is believed that the stress related with the condition contributes to the increased tension in the muscles that in turn leads to persistent pain.

Whenever a muscle is used, whether it is from work or worry, it increases it's tone (the degree of firmness or tension in the tissue). If this increased tone is sustained, it places certain demands on the muscle. When the muscle is held in this tensed position, it increases its need for oxygen, and subsequently, a need for more blood flow. In it's current state, the muscle may not be capable of receiving this increased oxygen, which manifests as pain. Additionally the muscles may have a much harder time disposing of it's cellular wastes, which can exacerbate the painful condition. This is the beginning of the cycle of pain –increased muscular tension – pain that makes living with fibromyalgia such a challenge.

Since the muscles are now in a near constant state of increased tone, they begin to adapt to this new condition by changing structurally, developing areas of fibrous tissue. This leads to the effected muscles pulling on the tendons (the tough tissues that joins the muscles to the bones).

This constant condition of increased tone in the muscles burns a great amount of energy which can help to explain the steady fatigue that plagues most fibromyalgia sufferers.

You can see how these debilitating cycles can effect a fibromyalgia sufferer and worsen over time. Now, take a look at how regular massage sessions can help to bring relief.

When you receive a massage, it helps your body function more optimally. For instance, those tense muscles are helped to relax, and for a time return to a more normal state. Muscular release is the first step towards calming the mind and can help to reduce the body's wasting of energy.

The flowing strokes of massage help to increase circulation that in turn carries oxygen and nutrients throughout your system and can aid in the removal of cellular waste and toxins.

How can massage therapy help patients suffering from fibromyalgia?

1. Using massage with passive stretching techniques, we can release myofascial tissue, and reduce muscle tension significantly.

2. By removing venous (used) blood from the tissue (by applying squeezing techniques), we significantly increase arterial (new) blood supply to the tissue (which means increased supply of oxygen, nutrients, and various different hormones and chemicals). This process helps fibromyalgia patients tremendously.

3. By breaking down pathological accumulations (using pumping massage techniques), and providing massive lymph drainage, we can help the body to remove waste products from the tissues. This is an extremely important factor for helping patients feel better.

4. Through massage therapy, we stimulate numerous different types of receptors located in the skin, muscle tissues, vessels, tendons, ligaments and periosteum (creating large amounts of impulses.) This way of stimulating the nervous system allows us to balance the functions of the sympathetic and parasympathetic divisions of the autonomic nervous system.

5. The general relaxation effect of massage, contributes to stress management headache reduction, and of course better sleep (most fibromyalgia patients' number one complaint)

If you think we could assist you or somebody you know in dealing with the effects of fibromyalgia come in and speak with one of our Therapists.

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