



MASSAGE AS MEDICINE

After surgery, it may be just what the doctor ordered.

BY MEGAN TSAI

As a fitness professional, you've probably seen your share of massage tables. The physically demanding work and the (sometimes overly) ambitious workouts you demand of yourself can take a toll. Massage helps relax tense muscles, ease pain and get you back to the gym more quickly. And if you're putting your clients through their paces, chances are you've referred a healthy number of them to massage as well.

But, have you considered who else might benefit from massage? Once the domain of elite athletes and wealthy spa-goers, a growing body of research shows massage can help patients recover from surgery more quickly and with less pain. And because everyone will most likely face a surgery at some point in their lives, fitness professionals are in the position to educate clients about a potentially helpful therapy—post-surgical massage.

A PATH TO RECOVERY

As a professional soccer player, Justin Martin (not his real name) pushed himself mentally and physically. At age 55,

Martin has yet to give up that athlete mentality. He is still an active skier and snowboarder, traveling around the world to find the best slopes. But, the demands he put on his body meant a slew of injuries—and surgeries—common for the hard-core athlete: a protruding disc in his spine; a torn ligament and tendon in his elbow; left and right knee repairs; and a surgery to repair the rotator cuff.

Martin's surgeries were serious—the kind some people never fully recover from. But, with the help of licensed massage therapist Marilyn Kier, who specializes in orthopedic massage, Martin was back on the slopes in three months or less following each of his trips to the operating room.

"Many health professionals consider the most important component of a successful surgery to be the post-rehabilitation process," said Kier. "During this time, natural movement is relearned and freedom of movement is reinforced. Massage plays an important role as an addition to standard rehabilitation procedures."

What to Expect During a Massage

- **Q&A:** A massage therapist will typically ask questions about your medical history to determine what type of massage is right for you.
 - **Undress:** You will be left alone in the massage room with plenty of time to take off your clothes (in most cases, you can leave undergarments on if it's more comfortable), and will be provided with a robe or a towel to cover yourself. A massage therapist will be respectful of your privacy.
 - **Lie down:** For most massages, you will be asked to lie on a padded table, and you will be covered with a sheet. During the massage, areas not being worked on will remain covered. When you are lying on your stomach, you'll place your head in a padded ring for comfort.
 - **Oils or Lotions:** Most massage therapists will use oils or lotions to help reduce friction. Be sure to tell the massage therapist if you have any allergies to lotions or fragrances.
 - **Communicate:** Be sure to communicate with your massage therapist if something is causing you pain. This is especially important in post-surgical massage.
- To find a massage therapist in your area visit www.amtamassage.org/findamassage/locator.aspx.



RESEARCHING THE BENEFITS

Increasingly, medical researchers are seeking pain relief alternatives for surgical patients. Many are concerned about the possible dangers of narcotic drugs but, they also want to help minimize the amount of pain a patient experiences.

"There have been growing concerns regarding the safety of narcotic pain relievers right after surgery," said University of Michigan massage researcher Daniel Hinshaw, MD. "The potential for overmedication exists. Also, narcotics can cause delirium in hospitalized patients."

There is also concern that surgery patients may suffer through pain because they worry about becoming dependent on narcotic drugs or are anxious about possible side effects. Some patients think they should just tolerate the pain, while others don't want to bother their nurses. Researchers say the patients are not the only problem. In some cases, physicians and nurses may not administer enough medication to relieve pain because of biases, cultural attitudes or a lack of knowledge. And that's where massage can help.

Dr. Hinshaw's research studied the effects of massage on patients undergoing major chest or abdominal operations. Some received routine care, others received a 20-minute massage, and the rest received 20 minutes of personal attention from the massage therapist, but no massage. The researchers found patients who received massages reported less pain and reduced anxiety when compared with the other two groups.

"Massage may have the potential to reduce the need for narcotics in future clinical applications," said Dr. Hinshaw. "Use of complementary and alternative medicine therapies, such as massage, also provides patients with more options. In the case of massage, patients receive the added benefit of increased human contact and comfort."

TALKING ABOUT MASSAGE

While more and more physicians are talking to their patients about alternative and complementary medical therapies such as post-surgical massage, many others are not. As a fitness professional you have likely experienced massage firsthand. In addition, you have important knowledge of your client's physical and medical history. Simply educating a client about massage, suggesting massage may be helpful and encouraging your client to speak with their physician about massage can make a big difference.

"In all cases, a patient should speak to their doctor and obtain their doctor's permission before receiving post-surgical massage," said Kier. "If the patient received massages prior to surgery, post-surgical massage will be an easy transition. If the patient is a first-time massage consumer, they will need general information about what to expect during a therapeutic massage session."

Undergoing surgery will be a difficult experience for your client. Not only will they have concerns about the surgery itself, but they will likely be worried about getting back to their normal fitness routine. By talking to your clients about massage, you give them the opportunity to explore an option they may have never considered. And if they get their doctor's go-ahead to give massage a try, it's likely they'll experience less pain after surgery—and you'll see them back at the gym sooner than expected.

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