

# Making the Most of Your Massage

## How to Prolong the Benefits of Bodywork

*Barbara Hey*

A massage works in wonderful ways, easing stress and pain, calming the nervous system, increasing circulation, loosening tight muscles, stimulating internal organs, and enhancing skin. The multiplicity of physiological responses sends a simple, clear message to the mind: Massage feels good. Of course, you want to hold on to that just-had-a-massage feeling -- total body relaxation, muscles relaxed and at ease, and fluid movement restored -- for as long as possible.

But how long that bliss lasts depends on the state of your body. If you're suffering from chronic pain or recovering from injury, then it may take more sessions and perhaps different modalities before optimal health is restored.

If massage is part of your regular health regimen, then it's more likely the effects will endure. In other words, the effects of massage are cumulative, like any healthy habit. The more often you get a massage, the greater and longer-lasting the benefits.



### Massage Frequency

How often you receive massage depends on why you're seeking massage. In dealing with the general tension of everyday commutes, computer work, and time demands, a monthly massage may be enough to sustain you. On the other hand, if you're seeking massage for chronic pain, you may need regular treatments every week or two. Or if you're addressing an acute injury or dealing with high levels of stress, you may need more frequent sessions. Your situation will dictate the optimum time between treatments, and your practitioner will work with you to determine the best course of action.

"You need to consider how you felt before the session and how you felt after, and then look at how long you maintain that," says Pieter Sommen, the chair of the eastern department in the Swedish Institute School of Massage Therapy in New York.

In general, experts say "regular" is preferable, but how regular depends on your situation. While daily massage would be delightful, practical considerations such as cost, time, and physical need likely determine the frequency of treatments. "It's best to maintain a schedule," says Eeris Kallil, CMT, a shiatsu instructor at the Boulder College of Massage Therapy in Colorado. "That way the body becomes conditioned and prepared for session at specific intervals."

## **Maintenance**

Whether you get a massage weekly, monthly, or just every once in a while, the following habits can maximize and extend the afterglow of treatment.

## **Water**

One bit of advice you'll hear over and over again is to drink plenty of water after a massage. Bodywork -- no matter the particular modality -- releases toxins, such as lactic acid and carbonic acid, that need to be flushed from the body. Massage also promotes circulation, increasing blood flow and oxygen and stimulating the lymphatic system, which helps rid the body of pathogens. After-massage hydration supports these functions, helping to eliminate released impurities, sooner rather than later.

## **Stretching**

Another helpful habit is stretching between massages to maintain joint mobility, prevent muscles from tightening up again, and keeping the life energy flowing. This may mean doing yoga or whatever specific or full-body stretches suggested by your practitioner. After a shiatsu session, for example, your practitioner may recommend "makko-ho" stretches, a series of six exercises designed to keep energy circulating. "This series of stretches take anywhere from 5 to 10 minutes a day, but really help keep the chi flowing through the body," says Kallil.

## **Exercise**

Working out can also help maintain the benefits of massage, and this habit should be continually cultivated. However, if you're receiving massage therapy to help speed muscle strain recovery, you may need to ease up on the exercise for a while and give the body time to heal -- particularly if you're recovering from a strenuous body-pummeling training regimen. "You don't want to over-work your body," says Kallil. That is, if running is taking a toll, try something more gentle and meditative such as swimming, walking, or tai chi.

## **Body Awareness**

After a massage, respect how your body feels. If your body seems to ask for rest, give in to that demand. This may mean backing off the to-do list, taking it easy, moving slower, and perhaps doing less for a while. And don't allow yourself to get fatigued because it will undermine the effects of massage. Get sufficient sleep to allow the body to absorb the effects and regain vitality.

## **Diet**

Finally, since you've just rid the body of toxins, support the body's renewed state by adhering to a healthy diet rich in fruits and vegetables, which will continue the detoxification process. Lay off the espresso and all adrenaline-challenges for a time -- which would short-circuit relaxation anyway -- and enjoy the calm.

The benefits of massage are many, including: increasing circulation, allowing the body to pump more oxygen and nutrients throughout the body, stimulating lymph flow and boosting immunity, relaxing overused or tight muscles, increasing joint mobility and range of motion, reducing recovery time after strenuous workouts or surgery, and relieving back pain and migraines, just to name a few.

By opting for a few lifestyle choices, you can extend these benefits and get the most out of your massage.