



When It Hurts

Athletes are finding

that massage and

acupressure help

the pain go away.

By *Leah Tatum*

In attempting to experience the thrill of victory; elite athletes with disabilities also feel

the agony of pain that comes with training, injuries and overused bodies.

Part of the Solution

Massage therapy is just one of the pieces of the picture of pain management, according to Doug Nelson, C.N.M.T., owner of Bodywork Associates, Champaign, Ill. "Massage therapy is truly complementary—the point being that pain prohibits other [physical therapy] efforts from being effective. It's really hard to do anything when the storm is going, and pain is the storm."

In fact, Nelson has just added a physical therapist to his staff of 14 massage therapists because he believes massage therapy is just one facet to healing the body. Strength and proper functioning, which PTs address, are also essential, he says.

The perception of massage therapy, once thought of as a luxury has evolved in the last seven to eight years, according to Nelson. "My hair stands on end when I hear the word 'alternative,'" he says. Athletes have found their performance can improve after incorporating massage therapy, which also speeds up recuperation time, he adds.

Massage therapy is seen as a positive method of pain management, but "just treating pain isn't an end in itself," says James Laskin, M.S., P.T., adjunct professor, Division of Rehabilitation Services, University of Oklahoma, Health Sciences Center, Oklahoma City. He stresses it is important to treat the problem, such as improper positioning or mechanics, not just the symptom. However, he adds, you have to deal with the pain first to be able to apply physical therapy treatments such as muscle strengthening or stretching.

Managing the Pain

The neck is a common area where pain affects the person who uses a wheelchair, according to Jean Reisman, M.T., a massage therapist at Bodywork. Athletes who participate in track competitions are particularly susceptible to neck pain, she says, because of

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the forward position their bodies are forced to take when racing.

Reisman says she first looks at the positioning of a client's body parts relative to his or her center of gravity. When treating a shoulder pain, for example, Reisman looks at the shoulder and how it compares to the rest of the client's body in relation to his or her center of gravity. She also looks at the shoulder compared with the opposite shoulder. It is important to address why areas such as shoulders are at different levels, she says.

Because a racer is in a striving forward position, Reisman says, the neck muscles in front are in danger of chronic shortening. One method she uses to treat neck pain is to apply ischemic compression, a mode of treating muscles to release points that cause pain and ischemia, or a lack of blood flow. For neck pain, she applies ischemic compression to the sternocleidomastoid muscle in the front of the neck.

The ischemic compression is a technique in which the sternocleidomastoid is pinched between the thumb and forefinger. While engaged in a conversation with the client, Reisman says she pinches the muscle until the client tells her it feels tender. It is important to keep a dialogue going, she adds, because only the clients can tell you what is going on in their muscles. "When they're just starting to feel tenderness, that's the optimal time to instigate change." Then she applies 5 to 10 seconds of pinching pressure to the muscle.

Athletes in wheelchairs also often become injured in the shoulder and wrist, according to Loretta Corona, C.M.T., a massage therapist at Newport Spike and Sport, Newport Beach, Calif. Such injuries are compounded, she says, because of the constant pushing and transferring done by these athletes. Some of the massage therapy she commonly uses on wheelchair athletes is for the pain associated with tears or strains in the rotator cuff.

To treat such injuries, Corona applies a three-part regimen. She begins by performing 15 minutes of soft-tissue work, which includes a light massage that increases circulation to the injured area. This makes the area more receptive to treatment, she says.

Next, she and chiropractor Timothy Brown, DC., an owner of the sports clinic, combine tissue work with mobilization. For example, if the client experiences pain performing a particular motion, they have the client repeat that motion 10 times while Corona massages the tissue around the injured area. This makes the pain more localized, she says, and the focus of the massage therapy can be more specific.

Following the mobilization, Corona likes to give the client a cool-down massage that doesn't directly treat the problem area, but a related muscle group such as the neck.

She also treats wheelchair athletes for the pain associated with wrist inflammations, Corona says. She treated one racer

for a wrist injury at the 1996 Boston Marathon, where she gave free pre- and post-race massages to wheelchair athletes. To relieve wrist pain, Corona typically applies pressure and ice to the inflamed area for 15 minutes. She does not perform deep-tissue work in these circumstances, because the inflamed area would be aggravated by deep massage.

Other massage techniques Corona uses are acupressure or shiatsu. Acupressure relies on trigger points spread out over the body, whereas shiatsu trigger points are closer to the point of injury. The treatment Corona applies depends on the severity of the client's injury and what method the client responds to best, she says. For more severe injuries, she usually applies the shiatsu techniques.

In acupressure or shiatsu, the number and location of pressure points depends on the treatment plan for each type of pain, says Corona. Once she assesses where the pain is, she uses her thumb to apply circular pressure to the proper trigger points for five to seven seconds and repeats this three times. Corona says clients usually feel relief immediately.

Acupressure is beneficial in conjunction with massage because applying pressure to the trigger points relaxes the muscles and the massage works the muscle fiber, says Pam Berrian, L.M.T., owner of Rancho Massage Therapy, Claremont, Calif. Berrian uses acupressure as part of her treatment for athletes with disabilities who are having lower back pain.

Athletes using wheelchairs are susceptible to lower back pain because their muscles are constantly being impacted from reaching, turning and twisting. She says that while people in wheelchairs usually overuse the muscles of the upper body, athletes "have a double shot of strain on their bodies."

To relieve the pain, she first applies moist heat from the lower back to the neck to loosen the muscles and relax the client. She then performs acupressure on the strained area and massages along the spinal column.

Then, depending on the client, Berrian may perform a deep-tissue massage. She has to gradually accustom clients to deep massage since their muscles may not be used to it, Berrian says. She adds that clients who plan to begin a massage therapy program should figure on the treatment regimen involving more than one visit to sufficiently treat the pain.

Muscle spasms between the shoulder blades also affect the athletes Berrian treats for pain. She again starts the treatment with moist heat packs and follows with a lot of massage because of the number of muscles in that region that cross and intertwine. "I know if someone is hurt in the shoulder," she says, "everything from the shoulder blades up will be affected." I

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