

The Benefits of Massage to the Elderly

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Massage therapy offers significant benefits to senior citizens and improves their sense of well being by managing the effects of aging.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports the proportion of the U.S. population aged 65 years and older is projected to increase from 12.4 percent (in 2000, the latest year statistics are available) to 19.6 percent in 2030; the number of persons over 65 years is expected to double from 35 million to 71 million in 2030; and the number of persons aged more than 80 years is expected to grow from 9.3 million in 2000 to 19.5 million in 2030.

A few health insurance providers in the United States are beginning to extend coverage on some plans to include massage because they recognize the value of preventative treatments. In many countries, massage therapy is already an integral part of the healthcare system. Massages are no longer considered a luxury because research proves they are a valuable component to a healthy lifestyle.

People of all ages benefit from the pleasure of human touch but human touch and company for a short period of time are invaluable for lonely and sometimes depressed seniors. In addition to the pain and discomfort that accompany their aging bodies, the elderly are often isolated.

"I think these people have touch hunger," said Cheryl Chapman, R.N., N.C.T.M.B., and a former nursing-home director. "In a nursing home or at home, there is no one there on a daily basis to hug them." It is well documented that emotional factors such as depression or anxiety can produce adverse physical symptoms. Many undesirable physical symptoms associated with aging can be addressed on an emotional level and massage can help.

"Though their basic needs are met", says Dawn Nelson, author of *From the Heart, Through the Hands*, and founder of the Compassionate Touch program, "elderly men and women can remain starved for the nourishment that comes through one-on-one attention and skin-to-skin human contact." Nelson says in addition to fighting off loneliness, caring touch helps address other quality of life issues for the elderly, such as depression, feelings of isolation, lack of self-esteem, and anxiety.

The older generation may have a more reserved attitude toward massage than younger clients. A clothed back- or neck-rub, or a hand-massage may be the

most appropriate massage. Isolation can be banished with a simple stroke of a hand, arm or foot. The benefits of touch do not need a formal massage table.

People often become less active as they age resulting in stiff muscles and soreness. Massage decreases muscular stiffness, helps maintain joint mobility and flexibility, and reduces the potential of arthritis setting in. Massage provides a natural means improving mobility and causes the body to release endorphins that act as natural painkillers. Seniors already suffering from the pain of arthritis receive considerable relief when treated with hot wax dips followed by range-of-motion massage.

Gentle massage around the spine offers pain relief for females with osteoporosis. Light massage and elevation helps relieve pressure for seniors with poor circulation and limb swelling. Administering touch to the elderly can also increase appetites; calm agitated states and promote restful sleep.

It is important to choose professional massage therapists experienced in geriatric massage. Geriatric massage strokes are very gentle and use light pressure to protect thin skin that can be easily bruised or torn.

There are times to refrain from giving a massage to the elderly because it may adversely affect a health condition. It is always acceptable to consult a physician before starting a massage therapy series. A full knowledge of the elderly patient's medical condition is necessary when deciding which types of treatments will be helpful without causing harm, discomfort or embarrassment. The elderly also often have skin problems but such problems (rashes, wounds, bruises, burns, and blisters) are usually local so clients can still receive massage in other areas.

Professional therapists should check with their client's physicians before administering a massage to anyone with health concerns. While it is always wise to be cautious, the right massage treatment from a professional massage therapist can be invaluable to seniors.