Massage Does Not Spread Cancer

Excerpts from:

Cancer and Massage Therapy: Essential Contraindications

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(There is a) faulty assumption that massage, by increasing circulation of blood and lymph, could promote cancer metastasis. Both parts of this assumption are flawed. The first is the assumption that massage significantly increases general circulation of blood or lymph. While this is widely believed and taught in the profession, I know of no rigorous research, using Swedish-type massage therapy, with adequate numbers that supports the claim of an overall boost in systemic circulation, as would be brought on by cardiovascular exercise. Only smatterings of smaller studies, themselves offering conflicting results, test effects on blood and lymph circulation, and these are about local or regional circulation—limited to the area of tissue worked directly by the therapist's hands… So far, the evidence is inconclusive about this readily accepted assumption. There is a second flaw in the assumption. Even if massage did significantly increase the overall flow rate of blood or lymph, it is doubtful that this would result in a faster metastatic process. Why is this? Think about how fast circulation flows under normal conditions in the body, without massage in the picture. Although figures differ on the normal rate of lymph flow, it seems to take about an hour for the lymphatic system to move material from out in a limb, through vessels and nodes to the subclavian veins, where the material joins the blood circulation. The transit time for material in the deeper tissues in the trunk would seem to be, if not comparable, at least in the same order of magnitude. Now think about blood flow. The time it normally takes a cell floating in the bloodstream to complete a circuit through the entire systemic and pulmonary circuits, returning to its starting point), which is only a matter of a minute or a few. Under high arterial pressure, this cell moves quickly through much of the circuit. It seems unlikely that massage therapy could significantly increase the rate of a cancer cell's movement through these channels. If it did, would massage hurry the process by 15 seconds? ? Would this make a difference to the disease process of metastasis?

METASTATIC FACTORS
Despite how fast a cancer cell in the lymphatic vessels or in the blood-stream can travel to other parts of the body, the actual process of metastasis can, in fact, take months or years. This is in part because not all cancer cells, free in circulation after shedding from the primary tumor, go on to form metastatic tumors. As described in Gayle MacDonald's book, Medicine Hands: Massage Therapy for People with Cancer, metastasis is a complex process, involving interactions of cancer cells with the immune system, other factors in the blood and the "target" tissues, as well as the genetic makeup of the cancer cell itself. So even though lymph and blood flow swiftly to carry the cell along its course, its ability to survive the flow, establish a site in a distant tissue, build its own blood supply, and thrive as a secondary tumor site is limited by other factors. Clearly, metastasis is more than a simple

mechanical movement from point A to point B. In fact, cancer metastasis seems to have a life of its own, a life that is well beyond the reach of a simple, skilled 50-minute general massage.

THE EXERCISE ARGUMENT Going even further, one of the most powerful arguments against a general massage contraindication is “the exercise argument.” So far we’ve questioned whether typical circulatory massage—characterized by medium and deep kneading and stroking of the Swedish variety or lighter, choreographed strokes of the lymph drainage variety—has been thought to promote metastasis. But if, indeed, this were true, wouldn’t exercise or other normal activities be more dangerous than massage therapy?…If we were truly concerned about the blood and lymph flow rate and metastasis, patients would be warned against exercise and movement. But physicians don’t tell cancer patients to lie still in order to keep cancer from spreading. In fact, where possible, exercise is strongly encouraged for people with cancer. Restrictions on activity are usually based on healing incisions, unstable bones or other risks, not on fear of cancer spread. Even breathing increases circulation, by encouraging venous return, as massage is thought to do. And of course, physicians don’t advise their cancer patients to breathe shallowly to reduce the chance of metastasis. Movement, breathing and circulation are normal functions—factors in health and healing, not isolated factors in cancer spread.