

# Is Oncology Massage Safe For Me?

From the Society for Oncology Massage  
www.s4om.org

## What is Oncology Massage?

An oncology massage is a client-specific, customized massage session designed to meet the unique and changing needs of someone in treatment for cancer or with a history of cancer treatment. A safe massage plan generally revolves around the side effects (both short- and long-term) of chemotherapy, radiation and surgery.

Oncology massage can only be provided by a massage therapist who has received training in the specifics of cancer and cancer treatment. This training is more about cancer and less about massage. When you are receiving an oncology massage, you are receiving traditional, established massage therapy techniques that have been adapted to account for your unique health situation. The changes that might be made to a massage that make it an "oncology massage" can fall under any number of categories, but typically they will be related to session length, pressure, positioning and areas of specific compromise or concern like mediports, bone metastases or skin reactions to treatment.

## Is massage safe for me?

The short answer is, "Yes." Even without knowing your specific situation, we can tell you that a properly trained oncology massage therapist can provide safe and effective massage for any person at any stage of their cancer journey: during and after treatment, in remission, cure or at the end of life.

Part of a complete understanding of oncology massage involves a shift in how we define "massage". Many people think of massage as something that "has to hurt to be effective" or as something they have received, with some discomfort, after an injury or surgery. Others think of some of the more vigorous forms of massage that get the most visibility in popular media. When we are talking about massage in the oncology community it can mean anything from a very "normal" massage equally involving all of your body to very light, simple touch intended to help you reconnect with your body in a kind and healing way. When we broaden the definition of massage in this way we can easily say, "Yes, oncology massage is safe for you."

Oncology massage is available in many of the world's leading cancer hospitals. Oncology massage training addresses the full spectrum of cancer-related issues: the physical consequences of cancer, the side effects of various treatments, and the psycho-social and emotional considerations. Your therapist will adapt his/her massage therapy techniques to your specific needs. In the words of one patient, oncology massage is like "a vacation from cancer."

## What are people living with cancer saying about oncology massage?

For many people an oncology massage is their first massage. Whether a person is a seasoned recipient of massage or receiving their first massage as a part of cancer treatment or recovery, the experience is at once unique to that person and shared by so many others. Massage can mean different things to the same person at different times in the cancer journey, but most find that massage provided by a trained therapist provides so much more than they expect.

"My therapist understands the difficult road of cancer and addresses the physical pain associated with the mental anguish."

"All through my diagnosis and treatment, the only time someone touched me and it didn't hurt was on the massage table. It was like an oasis in the desert."

"As soon as I had a surgery date, I started going in tighter and tighter circles. [Massage] was a big help in being relaxed, but ready when the day came."

"[Massage] was a great way to get through the stress of chemotherapy."

"We scheduled a massage a day or two before each chemo. That way my mind and body were looking forward to the massage, not to the chemo."

"I not only felt relief from the taxing effects of chemo and the debilitating muscle/bone ache, I ended up feeling an overwhelming sense of peace."

"It's my oasis. I get bogged down with doctors' appointments...all these big things coming at me. I get on the massage table and everything just melts away. For me that is a gift and he is a healer."

"During my sessions I felt completely at peace, a tranquility and serenity of the soul. Euphoria of the mind completely transcended the quiet horror of cancer."

"I was so sick from concurrent chemo and radiation. Massage was the only place where I felt in control and could help myself."

"Massage has created an overall sense of well being. I'm at peace with mastectomy and more at peace with my body image."

"It's like a vacation from cancer."

"After chemotherapy, I started receiving some gentle massage. I found I was able to care for my children rather than having to stay in bed for days."

"My oncologist told me I was in for a year of hell. It has been. But no matter how rotten I feel, it is never more than six days from my next weekly massage."

"Massage helped me to accept the new me. I am alive, I am beautiful, scars and all."

### What is the medical community saying about oncology massage?

Currently, massage therapy is seen in a wide spectrum of ways ranging from "Sure, can't hurt." and "What's the value in that?" to "Of course I recommend massage for my patients." and "Every person should have massage."

Massage in general has a long way to go and oncology massage has an equally long way to go before it is widely accepted within the medical community as an automatic and understood adjunct to mainstream treatments and interventions. Many cancer centers around the world are now incorporating massage therapy in the typical progression of treatment for their patients, but even some of these centers don't know about the importance of proper training or how and where to get it.

Nevertheless, an understanding of the value of massage is growing within the medical community and is likely to continue to do so as awareness increases among health professionals and training improves for therapists.

"No single therapeutic agent can be compared in efficiency with this familiar but perfect tool... the human hand. If half as much research had been expended on the principles governing manual treatment as upon pharmacology, the hand would be esteemed today on a par with drugs in acceptability and power." -J. Madison Taylor, M.D. 1908

"Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City is a national leader in cancer treatment. Researchers recently surveyed patients who had therapeutic massage added to their treatment regimens. Over a three year period, results impressively confirmed the value of massage. Anxiety levels decreased by 52%, pain by 40%, fatigue by 41%, depression by 32%, and nausea by 21%. Researchers concluded that massage is a "markedly effective, uncommonly noninvasive and inexpensive way" to control symptoms for cancer patients."

"Technical advances are important but we need to remember the difference between treating the disease and treating a patient. Massage is an extension of the time honored principle of laying on of hands. Massage therapy can help reduce stress, fears, and pain - all of this without side effects. Whether the mechanism of action of massage is physiologic or psychologic matters not to me. The fact that it makes the patients feel better and allows them to better deal with their illness or treatment is good enough for me." -Adapted from "Better Living & Health", Portland (Maine) Press-Herald, Summer, 2006

"Massage therapy is not contraindicated in cancer patients, massaging a tumor is, but there is a great deal more to a person than the tumor." -Roger E. Albery, MD, Director - Department of Surgery, St. Vincent's Medical Center, Portland, Oregon.

### What are the benefits of massage for someone with cancer?

Patients and their caregivers report many and varied changes after massage. A therapist trained in oncology massage can provide a variety of positive effects from relaxation to scar tissue mobilization to pain reduction, but the anecdotal evidence suggests that there are many benefits beyond even these that are enjoyed by people at all stages of the cancer journey.

#### **General Benefits**

- deep relaxation
- reduced stress
- improved sleep
- eased constipation
- increased alertness and mental clarity
- reduced anxiety
- less nausea
- reduced pain

#### **Following Surgery**

- reduced anxiety in advance of surgery
- easier recovery from anesthesia
- reduced post-surgical pain
- improved mobility and appearance of surgical scars
- reduced swelling
- improved range of motion
- easier adaptation to implants and expanders

#### **Following Radiation or Chemotherapy**

- reduced anxiety in advance of and during treatment
- reduced post-treatment fatigue
- improved appetite
- improved peripheral neuropathy

#### **Emotional Benefits**

- decreased anxiety
- decreased depression
- increased feelings of well-being
- being pleasantly distracted
- improved body self-image
- restored hope
- satisfaction in participating actively in a part of the healing process