
Oncology Massage

Overview

Oncology massage is the modification of massage techniques in order to safely work with effects of cancer and cancer treatment, and includes people in active treatment, those in recovery or survivorship, as well as those at the end of life.

Essential aspects of an oncology massage therapist's skill set are an informed understanding of the pathophysiology of cancer; the side effects of cancer treatments, such as medications, surgery, chemotherapy and radiation; and the ability to modify massage techniques in order to adapt for these side effects, as well as for the disease.

Assessments

Standard oncology massage intake questions include those pertaining to:

- cancer treatment history
- tumor site or metastasis
- compromised blood cell counts
- lymph node involvement
- blood clots or blood clot risk
- medications short and long term
- vital organ involvement
- fragile or unstable tissue
- medical devices
- clients experience of fatigue, neuropathy, or pain
- changes in sensation
- late effects of treatment

Guidelines

Clinical assessments and adaptations to the massage session for someone affected by cancer are critical to providing a safe massage.

For people in active treatment, recently into recovery, or at end of life, these clinical considerations can and do regularly change. Massage modifications as a result of positioning, pressure, pace or site considerations related to concerns like medical devices, side effects of drug treatments, surgery or radiation, compromised lymph nodes or blood cell counts, and other concerns, may apply, and are unique for each person.

Guidelines continued on page 2

Safe therapeutic massage during and after cancer treatment

Many cancer treatments require immediate as well as long-term massage modifications.

An oncology massage therapist will modify the massage session to adapt for these considerations, as well as those pertaining to the late effects of treatment and where applicable, disease progression.

Massage adaptations are required for:

- ◆ fatigue
- ◆ peripheral neuropathy
- ◆ low blood cell counts
- ◆ blood clots
- ◆ bone pain
- ◆ bone metastases
- ◆ radiation or surgery
- ◆ removal of lymph nodes
- ◆ lymphedema
- ◆ medications
- ◆ medical devices
- ◆ late effects of treatment

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Safe therapeutic massage during and after cancer treatment

Guidelines continued

Certain massage modifications will remain crucial even decades after treatment is complete. When providing massage for someone who has a history of cancer treatment, primary massage considerations include but are not limited to bone integrity, vital organ involvement, and compromised lymph nodes.

Contraindications and adaptations

With appropriate modifications there are few absolute contraindications. Deep tissue applications for a person in active treatment and massage over the site of a tumor are however universally contraindicated.

For someone in active cancer treatment or recovery a practitioner should avoid pressure and speeds that may add to fatigue, compromise skin or bone integrity, aggravate the side effects of compromised blood cell counts or vital organ impairment, cause nausea, create unnecessary risk for someone with or at risk for blood clots, or trigger or exacerbate lymphedema. The appropriate adjustment of pressure and speed can vary between clients. Practitioners should employ a practice of beginning conservatively and slowly “inching forward” with regard to increases in pressure and speed, if necessary.

Summary

Massage is a therapeutic modality that is increasingly being used as complementary care in the clinical care setting. In consideration of the massage adaptations required during and after cancer treatments, oncology massage education for touch practitioners, massage therapists and estheticians is essential for clinical safety and therapeutic benefit.

Oncology massage does not try to “fix” anything, and unlike many massage modalities is not a series of techniques or applied protocols. Rather, it is the ability of the therapist to recognize and safely work within clinically established guidelines, given a client’s unique circumstance.

Clinical research supports the use of massage in reducing pain and anxiety. Patient reported massage benefits additionally include improved sleep, decreased sense of isolation, enhanced body image, and increased feelings of well-being.

The Society for Oncology Massage addresses the varying needs of the touch practitioner, consumer, and health professional, and provides resources for advancing the knowledge and understanding of oncology massage.

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