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Massages used to be so simple: a 20-minute pamper to pummel away tension and exhaustion. But with our ever-increasing desire for complementary healing (we spend £1.6 billion a year in Britain on alternative therapies), exotic massages are cropping up everywhere. And, rather than just helping us unwind, they're claiming to cure a whole host of woes, from depression to insomnia. But how do they work? And can they really help to heal us a bit like a medicine?

'Most of these types of massage don't have clinical evidence to back them, but many are very effective,' says Dr Malcolm Vandenburg, co-author of *Positive Under Pressure* (£9.99, Avenue). 'Massage is good at treating specific physical problems. It relaxes muscles and stimulates blood flow, helping tissue to heal.'

But it isn't suitable for everything. 'If you have an acute injury that's still on the mend, a deep tissue massage could do more harm, so consult your GP,' warns Dr Vandenburg. 'And always tell a practitioner if you're pregnant – to practise safely, they should ask you these questions, too.'

Here our readers describe the massage they chose and explain the effect it had on their health problems.



'Tui Na therapy is helping me avoid an MS relapse'

STEPHANIE BEN-ARROS, 30

THE MESSAGE: An important part of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tui Na is the most widely practised form of massage in the world. The technique claims to work by balancing energy lines called meridians.

WHY I TRIED IT: 'Since being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in November 2006, I've noticed I develop symptoms whenever I'm stressed or emotional. I wanted to see if this form of therapy would help stabilise my moods, and prevent symptoms of MS such as pins and needles and muscle weakness. I hoped this kind of technique would slow down the deterioration of my nervous system, too.'

VERDICT: 'I've had five sessions. Morgane, my practitioner at Urban Bliss in London, works through my whole body, beginning with gentle strokes on my belly. Using her fingers, hands and elbows, the massage is sometimes soft and soothing, and at other times deep and painful. She finishes with a nurturing head massage, which feels amazing.'

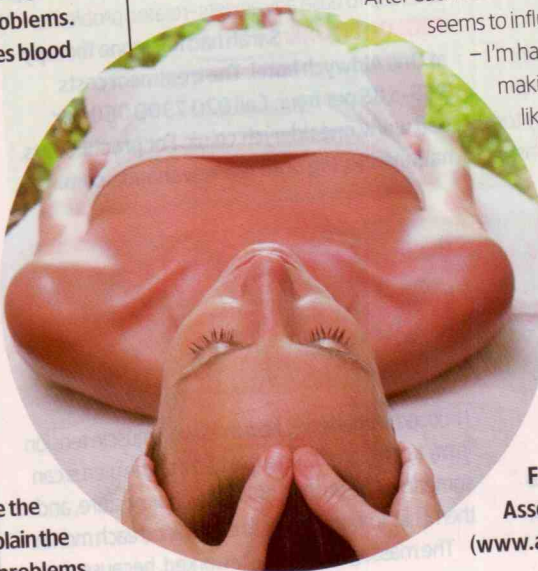
After each session I feel relaxed and more positive, and this seems to influence how I cope with the rest of the week

– I'm handling stress better, I think, therefore making the chances of my MS flaring up less likely. I get very tense around my diaphragm but have noticed that the treatment helps me breathe more easily, too.'

DR VANDENBERG SAYS: 'Traditional Chinese Medicine has an overall reputation for being effective. Tui Na claims to be helpful for chronic pain, muscular problems, migraines, irritable bowel syndrome and emotional imbalances.'

FIND OUT MORE: Call Urban Bliss on 020 8969 3331. One session costs £55.

For practitioners nationwide, contact The Association for Traditional Chinese Medicine (www.atcm.co.uk; 020 8361 2121).



'Thai Yoga Massage is starting to clear my 10-year cough'

JOANNA RAHIM, 41

THE MESSAGE: Claimed to have been developed by the Buddha's physician over 2,000 years ago, this massage is 'yoga without the effort'. The masseuse skilfully stretches you into a range of yogic positions, while stimulating pressure points with her hands and feet.

WHY I TRIED IT: 'After trying inhaled steroids, doctors told me they had no way of treating the chronic cough I've been living with for 10 years. It's been so bad that on more than one occasion taxi drivers have heard the hacking sounds of my lungs and offered to take me to hospital – I sounded like I had TB! I turned to Thai

Yoga Massage on the recommendation of a friend who said it might help.'

VERDICT: 'After four hour-long sessions, I feel transformed. Kira Balaskas, who teaches Thai Yoga Massage at London's Kailash Centre, stretched my body into a whole range of positions. Walking her feet up and down my back, she pulled my shoulders and stretched out my chest, loosening the muscles around my sternum and neck.'

Something is working as my cough has improved – I haven't had any remarks about my coughing in public, which is a rarity. And now I can have a conversation without my hacking interrupting.'

DR VANDENBERG SAYS: 'This technique combines general massage with deep stretches of the muscles and ligaments. It's good for relaxing muscles, stimulating circulation and lowering heart rate and blood pressure. Also, there's evidence to show that stretching techniques such as this could help with autism.'

FIND OUT MORE: Call the Kailash Centre on 020 7722 3939 or visit www.kailashcentre.org. One session costs £55. For general info, go to www.thaiyogamassage.co.uk. For practitioners nationwide, log onto www.wahanda.com.



'Hot stones are getting my emotional balance back'

SARAH BLACKSMITH, 28

THE MESSAGE: Flat, river stones are warmed in a special heater to between 50°C and 60°C. Some stones are then placed on strategic places on your body, such as your spine, thighs and between your toes; others are used for deep tissue massage.

WHY I TRIED IT: 'I was feeling emotionally shaky and not as assured as usual, so I thought this massage might make me feel better.'

VERDICT: 'I'm not one for massages, but this was such a pleasurable and relaxing experience – I'd love to go back. After my body was rubbed with scented oil, Lauren, my masseuse, put a warm soothing stone in the small of my back. She explained this would stimulate an energy point that promotes confidence and wellbeing. Then she placed some smaller stones between my toes and began massaging the muscles of my arms,

legs and spine with some larger stones. Finally, she put some cool ones around my eyes, which she said would reduce any puffiness. The heat of the stones felt relaxing and comforting, and I felt incredibly nurtured.

I walked out feeling emotionally balanced, calm, uplifted and relaxed. I've only had one massage so far, but it has helped.'

DR VANDENBERG SAYS: 'This massage probably isn't for you if you have lots of muscle tension and knots, but it's great if you want to feel relaxed and uplifted. As it counteracts stress, it'll boost wellbeing and help to ease any anxiety-related problems.'

FIND OUT MORE: Sarah had hot stone therapy at One Aldwych hotel. The treatment costs £55-£85 per hour. Call 020 7300 0600 or visit www.onealdwych.co.uk. For practitioners nationwide, log onto www.wahanda.com.



'Shiatsu eases my back pain'

NINA RAMA, 50

THE MESSAGE: A traditional Japanese massage technique, Shiatsu is often called 'acupuncture without the needles.' The method focuses on stimulating acupressure points with the aim of balancing energy lines called meridians, in a similar way to acupuncture.

WHY I TRIED IT: 'I damaged my lower back when I was a hurdles athlete in my 20s, and now it's caught up with me. It gets very painful, which in turn seems to affect my knees and shoulders.'

VERDICT: 'During five weekly sessions, I've noticed my whole posture change as my muscles and joints start moving more freely. My Shiatsu practitioner, Maria, gently stimulates pressure points in my spine, hips and shoulders. She uses a range of movements from simple pressure to rolling her hands and tapping.

As for my back pain, it's improved so much! There's less tension and stiffness in both my lower back and shoulders.'

DR VANDENBERG SAYS: 'There's no scientific evidence to show that Shiatsu works, but people do find it effective for a range of conditions, from back pain to digestive disorders. Its therapeutic effects probably come from relaxing muscles and triggering nerve endings, which restores balance.'

FIND OUT MORE: A session costs from £55-£85 per hour. Call The Shiatsu Society on 0845 130 4560 or visit www.shiatsu.org.



'Maya abdominal massage is keeping cramps at bay'

TINA CORNOCK, 31

THE MESSAGE: Developed in Belize by Dr Rosita Arvigo, this method has evolved from traditional Mayan womb massage and claims to help gynaecological conditions such as fibroids, PMS, endometriosis and infertility.

WHY I TRIED IT: 'I'd suffered from really bad period pains for years. Severe cramps would knock me sideways and I'd often feel nauseous, and as regular painkillers weren't strong enough, I'd have to take time off work.'

VERDICT: 'At first, I had an abdominal massage every week. My practitioner, Susi Kaiser, then taught me techniques to use at home. I now go for top-ups every month or so. Susi works in soothing circular movements around my belly, hips and lower back. Apart from being very relaxing,

I noticed immediately how it relieved muscle tension in my tummy area. Susi explained that the uterus can sometimes be pushed offline by poor posture, and then it has to work harder to expel blood each month.

The massages have really worked, because my cramps before each period are better. And since having the sessions, I haven't taken a day off work.'

DR VANDENBERG SAYS: 'This massage has a plausible basis for helping with gynaecological conditions. A paper published by The Cochrane Collaboration this year describes the benefits of uterine massage on reducing blood loss after childbirth, and says it could benefit all women.'

FIND OUT MORE: The treatment costs £35-£85 per hour. For a local practitioner, log onto www.arvigomassage.com.

Your DIY head massage

Try this technique in the shower every morning to help reduce stress, relax facial muscles and improve blood flow to the brain. Jane Alexander, natural health expert and author of *The Holistic Therapy File* (£14.99, Carlton Books), shows you how:

1. Sesame and coconut oils are commonly used for Indian head massage, but a blob of conditioner on wet hair when you're in the shower is a great alternative. Massage it all over your head with your fingertips.

2. Using long, sweeping motions, stroke the top of your head and use your fingers as a comb, running your fingernails through your hair in long strokes to stimulate blood flow.

3. Look down and massage the back of your neck using small, gentle circular movements with your thumb and middle finger.



4. Massage your temples, again using gentle circular movements, first with the tips of your index fingers, then with your thumbs.



5. Now focus on your shoulders. Massage them from the outside edge, then gradually move in towards the collarbone.



6. To finish off the massage, stroke your face lightly with your palms, moving gently down from the forehead toward the chin. Now you're ready to face the day.