

MASSAGE AND ITS BENEFITS ON OUR *IMMUNE* *STATUS*

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No one can deny the restorative power of massage. Reducing pain, depression, anxiety and stress, while strengthening our immunity. All that has an effect on our mental and physical well-being. Pain affects our lives and our quality of life. Massage is known to help reduce pain by increasing blood flow, by alleviating inflammation parameters and reducing overall muscle tension (Hauswirth and Mujika 2013).



It is a well-known fact that people showing a **high stress level** are more prone to injury and illness. **Stress reduction through massage** is also widely documented (Fateme et al. 2015).

Stress is known to raise your heart rate, to cause an increase in the stress hormone cortisol, which inhibits weight gain, raises blood pressure, causes headaches, digestive problems, sleep problems, heart disease, memory and concentration problems, just to name a few. All that affects our immune system and makes us physically vulnerable to infections.



In that context, the impact of massage on strengthening our innate and acquired immunity is currently being discussed. The underlying postulate is that massage increases the activity of white blood cells helping our body to fight disease and may induce a reduction in cortisol levels (Field et al. 2005).



■ MESSAGE IMPROVES OUR ABILITY TO FIGHT DISEASE

A study (Poland et al. 2013) suggests that regular massage naturally increases the ability of the healthy immune system to kill certain type of cells, while decreasing the number of T-cells, in order to improve the overall immune function of the body. In that study, 20 HIV-positive men received a 45-minute massage five times per week during one month. Participants showed both an increase in serotonin and in cells that constitute the immune system's initial defense against infections and disease.

■ PREGNANT WOMEN HAVE IMMUNE BENEFITS

In addition to the release of serotonin, further studies showed the immune benefits of massage on 52 healthy pregnant women. Women were divided into two groups: one receiving a 70-minute massage with 2% lavender essential oil every fortnight, the other receiving no massage. Researchers found that the oil massage group had a significant reduction in cortisol levels and an improvement levels of other immune markers. According to researchers, that study presents evidence that massage could significantly reduce stress and improve immune function for pregnant women. Those results can guide

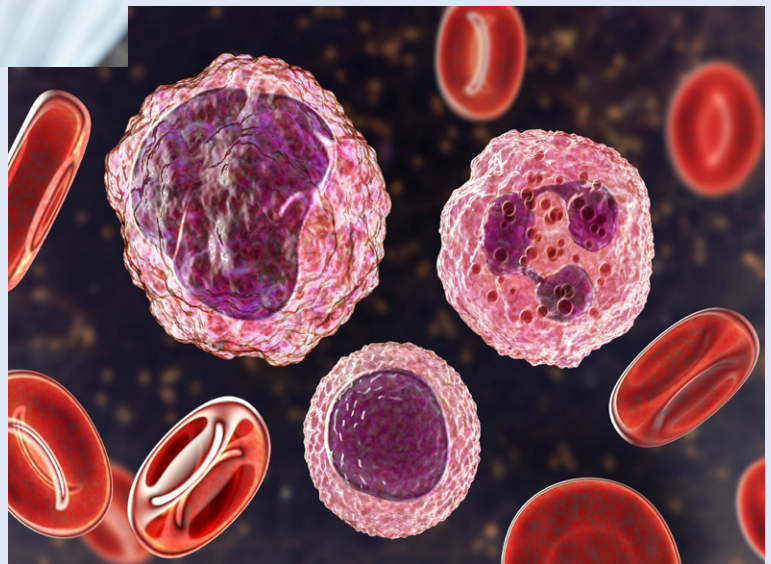
clinicians or midwives in providing massage to women throughout pregnancy.



■ EVEN A SINGLE SESSION STIMULATES IMMUNE FUNCTION

Finally, the question of the number of massages is often asked in order to appreciate the magnitude of the benefits. Is our immune system affected by the number of treatments? A study reveals that people who have had a single

session also experience significant changes in their immune and endocrine responses. Researchers compared the effects of a 45-minute Swedish massage session or a simple effleurage of the same duration (Rapaport et al. 2010). Blood samples were taken at different intervals before and after each session, and the researchers found that those who received a Swedish massage experienced significant changes in their lymphocytes (i.e. white blood cells), which play an important role in a healthy immune system that protects us from disease. The Swedish massage group also had a decrease in levels of arginine vasopressin (AVP), a hormone associated with increased levels of stress hormone (cortisol), and a decrease in inflammatory cytokines, which are produced by infection-fighting white blood cells.



IN CONCLUSION...

Those data indicate that massage not only provides well-being, it is also good for our overall health. More research is needed, but it seems that a single massage can bring measurable and lasting benefit. In the light of those data, the use of different massage techniques (i.e. mechanized massage) could be considered to boost our immune defenses and fight against our stress while facilitating access to a restful sleep.



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