

# Massage for Oncology Patients

## FACT SHEET 4

### About this fact sheet

Massage therapists, remedial massage therapists and myotherapists (massage therapist or therapist), often fill the gap when patients seek alternatives to medications and other therapies because they feel that massage therapy provides a level of relief that is appropriate to their needs.

The following provides information to General Practitioners and other registered health professionals when discussing treatment and care with oncology patients. As with all health-related therapies, no two people respond in the same way and no two therapists can provide a massage in the same way.

Massage therapy or myotherapy may or may not be right for a patient. Finding a professional, qualified therapist that you have confidence in, because they have the appropriate training, experience and skills needed, will assist in developing multidisciplinary pain management plans.

### Oncologists include massage in multidisciplinary care plans

Cancer centres around the country offer oncology massage, which is supported by a large body of evidence demonstrating its efficacy. Oncology massage is not new and has long been available in many cancer centres. This includes the Chris O'Brien

Lifehouse, Kinghorn Cancer Centre, Olivia Newton-John Cancer and Wellness Centre, Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, and many others.

### Evidence based massage for oncology patients

There is strong evidence supporting the use of massage therapy in the care of cancer patients.

Oncology massage is not a cure for cancer, but studies and real-life experience indicate that it does help oncology patients cope with their treatments and conditions, both physically and emotionally.

The conclusions of many recent studies show the positive clinical and anecdotal evidence that has emerged in cancer patient care:

- » A 2021 systematic review of the effectiveness of complementary therapies for the management of symptom clusters in palliative care in paediatric oncology found that therapeutic massage and Reiki may be effective, especially the pain-anxiety-worry-dyspnea cluster in children and adolescents undergoing palliative care.
- » A 2021 analysis of pain improvement after healing touch and massage in breast cancer found that healing touch and oncology massage were associated with clinically significant pain improvement.
- » A 2021 investigation into the effect of massage therapy on fatigue after chemotherapy in gastrointestinal cancer patients found that the study demonstrated that foot massage, as a simple method, could reduce chemotherapy-induced fatigue.
- » A 2020 evaluation found that consultations and life review (ECLR), nursing compresses, music therapy, and rhythmic massages were significantly associated with improvements in inner resilience and coherence in breast cancer patients.
- » Researchers undertook a review of complementary and alternative medicine in oncology during 2019 and found that the results seem to indicate that manipulative complementary and alternative therapy may be effective on symptom management in cancer.
- » A 2017 systematic review of the effects of the application of therapeutic massage in children with cancer concluded that therapeutic massage improves the symptoms of children with cancer, but there is a need for more research that may support the effects attributed to it.
- » A 2015 meta-analysis indicated a beneficial effect of massage for relief of cancer pain. Further well-designed, large studies with longer follow-up periods are needed to be able to draw firmer conclusions regarding the effectiveness.
- » A 2014 examination of the relationship between massage and symptoms in patients with advanced illnesses found that, following massage, patients noted short-term changes in symptoms, and a decrease in pain intensity and anxiety. They concluded that massage is a useful tool for improving symptom management and reducing suffering in palliative care patients.

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### Insights from providers of oncology care

The following highlights the real-life advice concerning oncology massage provided to patients by cancer centres and sector leaders across the country.

**Chris O'Brien Lifehouse** – Oncology massage is a specialised area that caters to the needs of those living with cancer, those who are newly diagnosed, and those with a history of the disease.

**Olivia Newton-John Cancer and Wellness Centre** – Oncology massage is a gentle form of massage designed to relieve tension often experienced by patients. It may also reduce symptoms such as nausea, pain fatigue and anxiety.

**Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre** – Oncology massage is a form of massage modified to meet the specific needs of people who might be newly diagnosed, undergoing treatment at Peter Mac or in survivorship. The primary goal is to foster comfort, relaxation and may provide relief from pain, nausea, sleeplessness or anxiety.

**Kinghorn Cancer Centre** – Oncology massage takes into consideration the physical changes that occur in the body during and after cancer treatment. The massage is modified to be safe at all stages of your treatment and recovery. It is deeply relaxing and nurturing.

**Eastern Palliative Care Victoria** – The benefits of massage may include, but are not limited to, reducing the side effects of chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and some medications; easing the discomfort of fluid retention (Oedema/ Lymphoedema); lessening the impact of pain and shortness of breath; improving mobility; and reducing tension, anxiety, and depression.

**Palliative Care Australia** – Palliative care massage addresses the client's symptom issues, the side effects of various treatments, and the physical, psychological, social and emotional consequences of living with a terminal illness.

**Palliative Care Knowledge Network** – The overall safety and the acceptability of massage to palliative care patients has been demonstrated by the uptake of these therapies within services.

**Oncology Massage Training** provides a national directory of oncology massage therapists.  
[www.oncologymassagetraining.com.au](http://www.oncologymassagetraining.com.au)

### More information:

- » [Australian Massage Directory](#) – find a professional qualified local therapist
- » [Massage & Myotherapy Australia](#) website – consumer section
- » [Australian Government Health Directory](#) – free health advice
- » [US Department of Health and Services](#) – massage therapy – what you need to know.

### Endnotes

1. Lopes-Júnior LC, Urbano IR, Schuab SIPC, Pessanha RM, Rosa GS, Lima RAG. 'Effectiveness of complementary therapies for the management of symptom clusters in palliative care in pediatric oncology: a systematic review', *Rev Esc Enferm USP*. 2021 May 19;55:03709. English, Portuguese. doi: 10.1590/S1980-220X2020025103709. PMID: 34037196.
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3. Alizadeh J, Yeganeh MR, Pouralizadeh M, Roushan ZA, Gharib C, Khoshamouz S. 'The effect of massage therapy on fatigue after chemotherapy in gastrointestinal cancer patients', *Support Care Cancer*. 2021 Dec;29(12):7307-7314. doi: 10.1007/s00520-021-06304-8. Epub 2021 May 27. PMID: 34043051.
4. Oei SL, Thronicke A, Matthes H, Schad F. 'Evaluation of the effects of integrative non-pharmacological interventions on the internal coherence and resilience of breast cancer patients', *Support Care Cancer*. 2021 Mar;29(3):1413-1421. doi: 10.1007/s00520-020-05617-4. Epub 2020 Jul 15. PMID: 32671562.
5. Calcagni N, Gana K, Quintard B. 'A systematic review of complementary and alternative medicine in oncology: Psychological and physical effects of manipulative and body-based practices', *PLoS One*. 2019 Oct 17;14(10):e0223564. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0223564. PMID: 31622362; PMCID: PMC6797104.
6. Rodríguez-Mansilla J, González-Sánchez B, Torres-Piles S, Martín JG, Jiménez-Palomares M, Bellino MN. 'Effects of the application of therapeutic massage in children with cancer: a systematic review', *Rev Lat Am Enfermagem*. 2017 Jun 8;25:e2903. doi: 10.1590/1518-8345.1774.2903. PMID: 28614430; PMCID: PMC5492650.
7. ee SH, Kim JY, Yeo S, Kim SH, Lim S. 'Meta-analysis of massage therapy on cancer pain', *Integr Cancer Ther*. 2015 Jul;14(4):297-304. doi: 10.1177/1534735415572885. Epub 2015 Mar 17. PMID: 25784669.
8. Calcagni N, Gana K, Quintard B. 'A systematic review of complementary and alternative medicine in oncology: Psychological and physical effects of manipulative and body-based practices', *PLoS One*. 2019 Oct 17;14(10):e0223564. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0223564. PMID: 31622362; PMCID: PMC6797104.