

# Massage for Oncology Patients

## FACT SHEET

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### About this fact sheet

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

While a proportion of remedial massage therapy and myotherapy treatments are initiated by patients self-directing their care, many appointments are initiated through a referral from a registered medical practitioner such as a GP, or an allied health practitioner.

Remedial massage therapy and myotherapy is not a cure for disease, injury or chronic condition. However, they can provide relief from pain and stress, improve mobility and help rehabilitation and recovery. Patients should always seek medical advice first when new conditions or pain arises.

The following will assist you in understanding what a professional qualified therapist is, and how the appropriate training, experience and skills can help in maintaining or restoring a level of health and wellbeing.

### 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 a specialised therapy that involves additional training.

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 undergoing treatment is strong

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 indicates 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 2023 Systematic review of 1,000 patients in 13 Randomised Controlled Trial (RCTs) found massage significantly improves cancer associated pain, including perioperative pain. There were no reported adverse events in the review.<sup>1</sup>
- » A systematic review and meta-analysis of 11 studies with 789 patients showed that massage had 'a marked effect on fatigue' in cancer patients – particularly in Breast cancer.<sup>2</sup>
- » In 2022, seven RCTs measured the intensities of pain, fatigue and sleep disturbance in palliative cancer care settings and found that Increasing doses of massage were associated with increasing positive responses in clinical cancer symptom clusters of pain, fatigue and sleep disturbance, with 60-minute doses found to be more effective.<sup>3</sup>
- » A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis of 7 trials found that massage reduces pain and anxiety post-operatively in breast cancer patients.<sup>4</sup>
- » A 2021 analysis of pain improvement after touch and massage in breast cancer found that 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.<sup>5</sup>
- » 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 in the symptom management of cancer.<sup>6</sup>

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### Insights from oncology carers and advice for patients are positive

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](#)

Our Wellness Therapies are offered by highly experienced practitioners as an adjunct to conventional medicine, where there is open communication between all care providers and the patient; an environment where patient choice and quality of life is paramount.

#### [Eastern Palliative Care Victoria](#)

As an integral part of our interdisciplinary approach to care, Massage Therapy has been a highly valued service at EPC for over 20 years. Evidence shows that massage provided to people receiving palliative care is both safe and beneficial.

#### [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.

### More information:

- » [Australian Massage Directory](#) – find a professional qualified local therapist
- » [Massage & Myotherapy Australia](#) website – consumer section
- » [Australian Government Health Directory](#) – free health advice
- » [Better Health Channel](#) – Complementary and alternative care - [Massage](#) and [Myotherapy](#)
- » [Oncology Massage Training](#) provides a [national directory](#) of oncology massage therapists

### Endnotes

1. Zhang, Yueyue MSNa,b; Wang, Shaotong MSNa; Ma, Xiaomin MSNc; Yuan, Yang MSNa; Cheng, Hui MSNa; Lin, Lu PhDa,a; Tian, Li PhDa,b,\* [Massage therapy can effectively relieve cancer pain: A meta-analysis](#). *Medicine* 102(27);p e33939, July 07, 2023. | DOI: 10.1097/MD.00000000000033939
2. Shan, S., Lin, L., Fang, Q. et al. [Massage therapy significantly improves cancer-related fatigue in cancer patients: a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials](#). *Support Care Cancer* 31, 464 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00520-023-07926-w>
3. Miladinia M, Jahangiri M, Kennedy AB, et al. [Determining massage dose-response to improve cancer-related symptom cluster of pain, fatigue, and sleep disturbance: A 7-arm randomized trial in palliative cancer care](#). *Palliative Medicine*. 2023;37(1):108-119. doi:10.1177/02692163221129158
4. Cole JS, Olson AD, Dupont-Versteegden EE. [The Effects of Massage Therapy in Decreasing Pain and Anxiety in Post-Surgical Patients with Breast Cancer: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis](#). *Global Advances in Integrative Medicine and Health*. 2024;13.i:10.1177/27536130241245099
5. 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.
6. 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.



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