

# Pain Management

## FACT SHEET 5

### 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.

### The effects of pain in Australia

A Report<sup>1</sup> commissioned by Pain Australia found that chronic pain (pain that continues for more than three months after surgery, an injury, as a result of disease, or from another cause) affects more than 3.2 million Australians.

*'For those who experience chronic pain, the pain can be debilitating and have an adverse effect on work, sleep and relationships. Individuals with chronic pain may also commonly experience comorbidities such as depression, sleep disturbance and fatigue. These comorbidities often contribute to worse health, societal and financial outcomes – for example, major depression in patients with chronic pain is associated with reduced functioning, poorer treatment response, and increased health care costs (Karapetyan et al., 2017).'*

### Benefits of remedial massage therapy and myotherapy in acute and chronic pain management

Remedial massage therapy and myotherapy has been shown to aid in the treatment of acute pain and prevention and management of chronic pain. The integration of professional massage therapy into patient care can help prevent the transition from acute to chronic pain states.

Remedial massage therapy and myotherapy are also associated with reductions in pain and depression that is often present as comorbidities in patients<sup>3</sup> who experience long-term chronic pain.

Given the common relationship<sup>4</sup> between physical health and mental health,<sup>5</sup> improving the quality of people's daily lives through professional massage therapy can have profound

effects on maintaining positive health and wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> Improvements in a patient's ability to walk<sup>7</sup> or drive<sup>8</sup> with less pain, engage in social activities,<sup>9</sup> reduce stress<sup>10</sup> at work, improve mobility,<sup>11,12</sup> and maintain social ties for older people or people with chronic disease such as diabetes,<sup>13</sup> are significant for patients limited by chronic or acute pain and/or prone to mental health issues.

Easing the debilitating symptoms of cancer,<sup>14,15</sup> or improving sleep<sup>16</sup> after cardiac surgery to achieve a more positive disposition and normal functions are profound improvements for seriously ill patients.

### Musculoskeletal Pain

One of the ten most common general practice patient presentations in Australia is for non-specific low back pain.

Researchers of a significant 2020 systematic review of 233 studies, found that massage consistently improves pain and function in chronic low back and neck pain beyond the course of the therapy.<sup>17</sup>

A 2019 study found that at 8 weeks, massage significantly improved WOMAC Global scores compared to light-touch and additional improvements of pain, stiffness and physical function compared to light touch and usual care in osteoarthritis of the knee.<sup>18</sup>

There is also evidence that suggests soft tissue massage is effective for improving pain, function and range of motion in patients with shoulder pain<sup>19</sup> and neck pain.<sup>20,21</sup>

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### Post-Surgical Pain

Pain management is critical for patients after surgery and therapy has been shown to improve post-operative pain and anxiety.<sup>22</sup> A 2017 systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials found that massage reduced the

intensity of acute postoperative pain of critically and acutely ill patients post-cardiac surgery compared to sham massage or attention control and compared to standard care alone.<sup>23</sup>

### Acute Pain

Effective management of pain in acute care settings is vital in preventing the transition to a costly chronic state, which has negative outcomes for patients and healthcare systems. The integration of remedial massage therapy and myotherapy into the acute care setting has been shown to provide benefits to patients' ability to deal with the challenging physical and psychological aspects of their health conditions and enhance

the recovery process.<sup>24</sup> This includes improvements in related relaxation, sleep, emotions, recovery and, finally, the healing process.

These factors all contribute to effective resolution of acute pain states, preventing chronic transition. Additionally, preliminary evidence suggests that massage may also reduce the costs of care<sup>26</sup> after an initial course of therapy in the acute pain setting.

### The contribution of professional remedial massage therapist and myotherapy

As the most used complementary therapy,<sup>26</sup> qualified remedial and therapeutic massage and myotherapy (professional therapies) have long been embraced and accepted by the community and medical and allied health practitioners.

Many qualified therapists work in integrated settings, involving hospitals, general practice, community health centres, private clinics, palliative care, aged and residential care facilities and in the home.

The RACGP (Royal Australian College of General Practitioners) recommend the use of massage therapies, suggesting it can improve pain, depression and sleep<sup>27</sup> while the UK's National Institute for Health and Care (NICE) guidelines recommend considering it in the management of osteoarthritis and low back pain.<sup>28,29</sup>

The Ottawa guidelines indicate that massage therapy is effective at providing pain relief and improving functional status in lower back pain as well as in providing short term improvement of sub-acute and chronic lower back pain symptoms and decreased disability immediately post-treatment.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, respondents to the Massage & Myotherapy Australia 2023 Practitioners' Survey of its 8,650 members indicated that increasing demand for higher level massage therapy and myotherapy services includes:

- » 20% of consultations are part of General Practitioner (GP) Health Plans
- » Referrals from Registered Health Practitioners was a primary source of work for qualified therapists including:
  - Allied Health Practitioners 30%
  - Private Health Insurance 15%
  - GP Referrals 12%

Pain Australia<sup>31</sup> reports that, for many pain sufferers, the [lack of access to integrated pain management](#) services is acute, especially in rural, regional and remote areas and Indigenous communities.

The multidisciplinary approach to pain management is a key recommendation of Pain Australia's [National Strategic Action Plan for Pain Management](#) (the Action Plan), being endorsed by the [International Association for the Study of Pain](#). 'These may include pacing activities throughout the day, so pain remains manageable; using massage, heat and cold packs; and carrying on with useful and purposeful things.'

The Opioid Management Team, which presented *Alternative options to codeine*,<sup>32</sup> said that while heat and massage are contraindicated in the first 48 hours following musculoskeletal injury, the team also suggested that Practitioners discuss non-pharmacological options including heat, massage, psychotherapies, physiotherapies, osteopathy, etc. for patients suffering from chronic pain. In the absence of disease, [Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation \(TENS\)](#), Acupressure (also known as Chinese Acupressure), and Acupuncture are modalities commonly used by massage therapists and myotherapists and were listed for menstrual related cramps.

The TGA website also offers '[Talking tips for Pharmacists](#)', that include flagging a number of non-medication and therapeutic options, including massage as part of a patient's pain management strategy.

While under the new schedule some patients may have to accept that a certain amount of pain is inevitable, patients can continue to seek out professional therapists and myotherapists for relief of pain and chronic pain through the Association's [Australian Massage Directory](#).

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### Endnotes

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