

THE EFFECT OF MASSAGE ON CLIENTS WHO HAVE MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

Alan Lunn BSc(Hons) DSM RMT OSM SMTO

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a progressive neurological disease which targets the central nervous system (CNS). Many people may also be surprised to learn that it is the most common cause of severe neurological disability in adults of northern European origin.¹ Per capita there are more people in Scotland with MS than in any other part of the world, with an estimated 10,500 Scots suffering from this condition.² MS usually appears in people between the ages of 20 and 40 and is twice as likely to occur in females than males.³

Multiple sclerosis is an autoimmune disease but what is unclear is the cause or trigger for the disease. When a person suffers from MS the myelin sheath that surrounds the nerve axon is attacked and delaminated. The name multiple sclerosis comes from the fact that after the myelin has been attacked it forms a scar or plaque, a sclerosis, in multiple regions. There are four main classifications of MS. The most common form of MS is relapsing-remitting MS which accounts for about 55% of MS patients. A person who suffers from relapsing-remitting MS will experience acute disease attacks but will be stable and will partly recover between attacks. The severity of the damage to the nerves and the location of the nerves attacked will determine the how the patient is affected by the disease. It is important to note that the acute attack is an inflammatory response. The second most common form of MS is secondary progressive, affecting 30% of sufferers. This type of MS is characterised by less regular acute attacks where the symptoms slowly worsen. The third type of MS is primary progressive MS, affecting 10% of sufferers. Primary progressive MS is characterised by a slow deterioration without any remittance from the symptoms. The fourth and final type of MS is progressive relapsing this type affects only 5% of those diagnosed with MS. Progressive relapsing is characterised by a slow deterioration and as the disease progresses there may be acute phases.² Among patients with MS, relapses do not significantly influence the progression of irreversible disability.⁴ The way in which a person is affected by MS depends largely upon the type of MS that they have, the nerves that are attacked and the severity of the damage done. This is important for the massage therapist to understand because MS is an inflammatory response, so during the acute relapse phase massage is very much contra-indicated. It is also important for the therapist to understand that because of the degenerative nature of the disease and often the poor prognosis often no change or a stability of symptoms is positive.

Stress is believed by many to be a contributory factor in having a relapse,⁵ so massage is one of many complimentary therapies that people with MS try. Massage therapists are well placed to help people with any chronic condition deal with their anxiety and emotional stress, as well as the physical manifestation of the stress. By providing an environment where the client is free to express any emotion in a comfortable space the therapist can enable the client to release or discuss any worries without being concerned about confidentiality. Relaxing massage will help relieve any muscle spasm will reduce stress hormone levels and will give the client with MS some physical contact that may be missing in their lives, particularly if they are disabled.

Muscle spasm, or spasticity, is a common symptom of more advanced MS. This spasticity is painful and can limit the patient's range of movement. Massage can act to reduce the muscle spasm and to help maintain an active range of movement. A massage therapist can help a client who suffers from MS deal with muscle spasm before the symptoms become too painful. Many MS sufferers are not offered physiotherapy until their symptoms are advanced and it is in the early stages that massage can have a dramatic effect on MS associated muscle spasm.

There have been several studies about the effect of massage on patients with MS. A study was reported in the Journal of the American College of Medicine⁶, which showed a positive outcome for MS sufferers after a period of massage treatment. Twelve MS patients received a 25minute back and leg massage, their mood states were recorded before and after the treatment. The study found that mood state improves after massage and more importantly immune function after the massage also improved. In their paper the researchers noted that the findings supported their hypothesis that massage "would produce a more positive mood state with MS sufferers" and that it "would promote positive immune modulation in those clients". The study group for this study was very small and there was no control group so the scientific validity of the results is doubtful however the premise that massage helps people with MS is sound.



Another study reported in the Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies ⁷ described a trial where the effects of massage were examined on 24 patients. In the study the subjects were randomly assigned to either a control group or a massage group. Those assigned to the massage group received a 45minute massage twice a week for 5 weeks; those assigned to the control group received standard medical care for their conditions. Anxiety, stress and mood states were measured via self-reports before and after the study. The results showed that those who were in the massage group were less anxious and depressed and by the end of the study had improved self esteem, better body image and image of disease progression, and enhanced social functional status. Again the sample size of the group in this study was very small and the study only lasted 5 weeks, but it did contain a control group. This study does show, if not prove, that massage is beneficial to those who suffer from MS.

Multiple sclerosis is a complicated and poorly understood autoimmune disease. The symptoms are varied and effect patients in different ways and to differing degrees. Massage can help reduce the symptoms of MS and can help restore some of the function lost because of muscle spasm and can help in pain management. More research is needed, both into MS and into the effects of massage on people who suffer from this common debilitating disease.

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Alan Lunn is a Remedial and Sports Massage Therapist and Personal Trainer currently practising in Edinburgh. He can be contacted by calling 0131 6621896 or 07773 563225, or by emailing alan@alanlunn.co.uk or visiting his website at www.alanlunn.co.uk.

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