6 Unexpected Benefits of Healing Touch
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We all know that massage feels great—but it can boost your physical and mental health big time too.

Healing touch has become a widely respected way to prevent and ease health issues; some doctors, particularly practitioners of functional medicine, a discipline that works to attack the underlying causes of disease, are recommending massage to their patients.

"Moderate-pressure massage has a huge variety of benefits because it stimulates the vagal nerve, which has branches all over your body, so, for example, it slows heart rate and relaxes your nervous system," says Tiffany Field, Ph.D., director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami Medical School. Here are six ways massage can boost your overall health:

1. You'll get sick less often

Massage can reduce levels of stress hormones like cortisol while simultaneously increasing levels of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that fights depression and pain. "If you can reduce..."
cortisol, you can save natural killer cells, which are the front line of the immune system to ward off cancer, bacteria, and viral cells," says Field.

2. You can use it to treat pain

When your serotonin levels are up, you may experience less pain, making massage a natural way to deal with physical discomfort. "I had a hospice patient who had unrelated, major pain in his shoulders," says licensed massage therapist Jan Platt. "Through massage, we were able to alleviate the pain enough that he could go four or five days without narcotics." Massage better connects you with all parts of your body, and it follows that you may catch an out-of-whack back before it turns into a herniated disc. "How many times have I had patients say to me, 'I didn’t know I had pain there?'" asks Platt. "You can use that information in your daily life to stop aggravating an area you didn’t know was limiting you."

3. You could have an easier delivery

Studies conducted at the Touch Research Institute found that prenatal massage can lower stress hormones, increase serotonin and dopamine, and reduce intra-uterine artery resistance—making it easier to deliver nutrients and oxygen to the fetus. This can result in fewer premature deliveries and lower incidence of low birth weight. When pregnant women received a massage during labor, the labor was reduced by an average of three (!) hours. "If you’re pregnant, make sure your massage therapist has specialized training," says Platt.

4. You’ll become more comfortable with your post-baby body

Taking off all your clothes and lying down on a massage table requires a lot of vulnerability—and that can be scary, especially if your body doesn’t look quite like it did pre-kids. But doing so can also help you feel better about what you have. "A good therapist will work with a client’s comfort level, even through clothing if you wish," says Platt. "Experiencing massage in a professional setting with a therapist you trust helps you be more in touch with your body and how amazing it really is." The feelings of self-acceptance will help you outside of your therapist’s office, too.

5. You may find relief from some symptoms of stress, anxiety, or depression.

“When you suffer from anxiety or depression, your body is stressed-out,” says CG Funk, vice president of industry relations for Massage Envy Spa. Several studies have shown that touch therapy can be beneficial for people with mental health issues or eating disorders. It may be, at least in part, because massage gives you a time and place to confront your feelings. "It’s a safe space to be who you are, think what you need to think, and express what you need to express," says Platt. "That’s not an everyday occurrence."

6. You’ll be more productive

You may think you don’t have 60 or 90 minutes to take a time-out from the daily grind, but similar to leaving your desk for lunch, when you take a break, you often get more done. "Massage changes your brain waves in the direction of heightened alertness, but also relaxation," says Field. "You’re more relaxed, so you can pay more attention, as opposed to when you’re in a hyper-aroused state and are easily distracted."

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