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WHAT IS MASSAGE THERAPY?: It encompasses a group of techniques used to manipulate muscles and other soft tissues by applying varying pressure, rubbing and movement using fingers and hands. Sometimes forearms, elbows or feet may be used. The goal is to relax the tissues, increase blood flow and also oxygenation to the area being massaged. Massage therapy warms the tissues and decreases pain. The most popular types of massage include Swedish massage, deep tissue massage, trigger point massage, and shiatsu massage.

REASONS TO USE MASSAGE THERAPY: Studies of selected physiological parameters suggest that massage therapy can alter various neurochemical, hormonal, and immune markers, such as substance P in patients who have chronic pain. Studies have been conducted on the use of massage for low-back pain, and there is some evidence of the efficacy of massage for both acute and chronic low-back pain. Manipulation may be as effective as some medications for both migraine and tension headaches and may offer short-term benefits to those suffering from neck pain. Studies have not compared the relative effectiveness of different manipulative techniques. Scientists don't exactly know why massage therapy works for so many

people, however there is evidence of physical, physiological and psychological reasons for its success.

Physical reasons. Applying pressure to the affected fiber can loosen up stiff muscles and tendons. Heat produced by hand friction can also loosen stiff connective tissues and muscles.

Physiological reasons. The release of certain chemicals by massage therapy help people relax, improves blood circulation and gets rid of toxins that build up in our muscles as they work.

Psychological reasons. Touch and contact with the therapist can produce feelings of relaxation and well-being.

RISKS OF MASSAGE THERAPY: Massage therapy is usually very safe. However, there can be dangerous risks in certain cases.

Blood vessel disease. If you have any disease of the blood vessels of your legs especially, check with your doctor before you have a massage since a clot may come loose. If it moves to your lungs it can be fatal.

Open skin surface or burns. If you have infected skin, burns, herpes or cold sores, swelling cuts or bruises, or any acute injuries you should not have a massage in the affected area.

Severe back pain. You should check with your doctor if you have severe back pain before a massage. You could have a herniated disk or another problem with your back that requires other therapy.

Pregnancy. If you are pregnant check with your gynecologist before a massage. During the first three months of pregnancy the abdomen, legs and feet should not be massaged.

Osteoporosis and broken bones. Advance osteoporosis patients should avoid massage.

RESEARCH AND BENEFITS OF MASSAGE THERAPY.

The number of adults receiving massage therapy from a licensed massage therapist has more than doubled since the late nineties. The majority of healthcare providers are recognizing massage therapy as a legitimate aid for lower back pain and an effective adjunct to lower back treatments. Over half of the healthcare providers do encourage their patients to use massage therapy in addition to medical treatment.

Research on massage and back pain carried out at the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami in 2001 found that: "Massage lessened lower back pain, depression and anxiety, and improved sleep. The group also showed improved range of motion and that the patients' serotonin and dopamine levels were higher" (International Journal of Neuroscience, 106, 131-145.) According to the American Massage Therapy Association, research has shown that massage therapy provides many important health benefits, including:

- * It improves blood circulation, which aids in recovery of muscle soreness from physical activity.
- * It relaxes muscles for an improved range of motion. The muscle relaxation also helps with insomnia.
- * It leads to increased endorphin levels. The increase of endorphin levels is actually one of the greatest benefits of massage therapy. Endorphins are the chemicals the body produces that make you feel good, and are very effective in managing chronic pain.