

Massage Boosts Your Immunity, New Study Finds

By Emily Main, Rodale.com
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The benefits of massage are immediately obvious to anyone who's had one. A massage session calms you down, eases your anxieties, and even helps you sleep at night. Now a new study, funded by the government's National Center for Complimentary and Alternative Medicine, finds that those sessions may help you ward off diseases, too.

The details: For the study, published in the most recent issue of the *Journal of Complimentary and Alternative Medicine*, the authors recruited 53 healthy adults between the ages of 18 and 45 and divided them into two groups: one that received a traditional Swedish massage, and another that received a session of light touch meant to simulate a massage but without any actual massage-therapy techniques. The Swedish massages were all performed by certified massage therapists to ensure uniformity. Each participant had an IV inserted into one arm for the duration of the massage and for a few hours afterward, and blood was drawn at various intervals to measure levels of various hormones and immune system markers.

[5 Surprising ways to boost your immunity.](#)

The authors were working under the theory that massages increase the body's levels of oxytocin, or "the love hormone," which itself helps regulate levels of hormones related to stress. Yet, they found that wasn't the case. People receiving the "light touch" treatment actually experienced higher levels of oxytocin than the massage recipients. But unlike the light touch group, the massage recipients saw significant decreases in stress hormones and increases in the body's production of various cells that boost immune system response.

What it means: A single massage could help boost your immune system and help you better cope with stress, even if you're not sick or stressed out. "I'm really intrigued by our findings," says Mark Hyman Rapaport, MD, professor and chairman of the department of psychiatry and behavioral neurosciences at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, who adds that he was an "incredible skeptic" about the benefits of massage therapy before doing this study. "I always wondered, what does it do that so many people claim to feel better afterwards?" he says. "We're finding that biological changes do occur as a result of even a single session of massage, and that these changes may benefit even a healthy individual."

[Boost your happy hormones and stay healthier.](#)

While it may be enough for most people to know that getting a massage makes them feel better, regardless of what the biological effects are, Dr. Rapaport says that his findings could help advance the use of massage therapy in traditional medicine. Which would be good news for people looking for more options to treat their medical complaints. "Based on data that have come out of a number of the surveys, a majority of Americans would rather go to an alternative practitioner than a physician, and would prefer to have an alternative to traditional care," he says. The few studies on massage therapy that have been done have focused on specific complaints, such as back pain or anxiety, he says, but his research suggests that the therapy could be beneficial to people suffering from a wider range of immune system disorders.

A weekly massage is good for body and mind; here's how to benefit:

Find a certified therapist.

The massage recipients in this study received treatment from certified therapists to ensure consistency and high quality. You can find one near you via the websites of the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage & Bodywork and the American Massage Therapy Association.

[How to rub-out stress today.](#)

Give yourself a hand (massage).

Although full-body massages yielded the profound biological changes seen in this study, other research has found that a simple five-minute hand massage was able to lower stress levels as well.

Feel the love in other ways.

Dr. Rapaport notes that massage recipients didn't see significant increases in oxytocin levels, but people in the light-touch group did. And as a result, those people saw larger drops in a hormone that stimulates the production of the stress hormone cortisol. There are lots of other simple ways you can increase your body's oxytocin levels, massage table or no, such as holding hands with your significant other, petting an animal, and listening to comforting music.