Hands-On Healing

Under Pressure

It has taken Westerners a while—hundreds of years, in fact—to realize what people in other parts of the world have long known: Alternative treatments, such as massage and acupressure, have real health, mood, and, yes, even beauty benefits. The good news is that you don’t need to seek out the services of costly professionals for minor aches and pains. Here’s how you can use a little DIY care for great results.

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**Massage**

Who doesn’t love a massage? And who doesn’t think, *I wish I could get a massage every day?* But you don’t need to shell out a lot of money to take advantage of its many benefits. Enter the world of self-massage.

Before you dive in, here are some general guidelines to make sure you are doing it safely.

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**Massage Moderation**

A common mistake is to overmassage an already inflamed area. “More is not always better,” says Al Kupczak, a massage therapist in Boulder, CO. Don’t zone out while watching TV and end up working one area for more than 10 to 15 minutes. Also, according to Julia Kirtland, a massage therapist in Portland, ME, a few minutes every day is better than a half hour once a week.

**Ease Up**

Our body’s muscles and connective tissue are complex and sensitive; they react to stimuli such as pressure, heat, and speed differently. With pressure, it’s a matter of easing into it and not going too hard. “It sounds counter-intuitive,” says Kupczak, “but pressure does not equal depth.” Going too hard too quickly causes the muscle to seize up when what you want it to do is release the muscle. Think of warming up into the massage, like you would a workout, and then avoid going too hard.

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**The Hands Have It**

Tools can’t sense your muscles relaxing; only your hands can. When using any implement for self-massage, stop occasionally to check in with your hands and feel how your muscles are reacting. See if your muscles are relaxing and loosening before proceeding. By listening to and learning from your body’s signals, you can progress.

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**Working Out Sore Muscles**

Nothing beats a postworkout massage for sore, overworked muscles, and nothing beats rolling on a ball or foam roller to help your muscles recover. Think of it as ironing out the wrinkles in your rumpled musculature. A short postworkout massage can speed muscle recovery, according to scientists at McMaster University. They discovered that 10-minute leg massages reduced cyclists’ postexercise inflammation. The athletes also saw improvements in mitochondrial function, which can speed healing, says researcher Simon Melov, PhD.

But you don’t need to be an athlete to get the benefits of this type of self-massage.

**Foam Rolling**

A foam roller is best for covering larger areas, such as the quads, hamstrings, and IT bands. Lie with the painful part of your body on the roller and then slowly roll the full length of the muscle group, starting where the muscle begins and stopping where it ends. Ease into the massage and gradually apply more pressure via increased body weight.

**HOW IT WORKS**

“As you roll a muscle back and forth on a dense foam cylinder, it breaks down adhesions and scar tissue,” says Scott Levin, MD, sports medicine specialist at Somers Orthopaedic Surgery and Sports Medicine in New York. “It also warms and stretches muscles, increases circulation, and prevents soreness.”

But you don’t need to be an athlete to reap the benefits of foam rolling—any sore muscle will heal faster using this method. Try this routine once or twice a day, two or three times a week.

**HOW TO DO IT**

Roll back and forth slowly along the cylinder 10 to 12 times. Pause at tender spots, take a deep breath, and press your weight into them.

**Hamstrings**

Sit with your left leg on the roller, right knee bent with right foot in front of roller, hands on the floor behind you (a). Roll from just above your knee to just below your glute (b). Switch legs.
GLUTES
Sitting on the roller, cross your left leg over your right knee and lean toward the left hip, hands on the floor behind you for support. Roll the left cheek. Switch sides.

QUADS
Lie facedown on the floor and place the roller under your hips (a). Lean on your left quad (b) and roll between your hip and knee (c). Switch legs.

ILIOTIBIAL BANDS
Lie on your left side with the roller just below your hip, hands on the floor in front of you for support. Bend your right leg and place that foot on the floor (a). Roll the side of the left leg between hip and knee (b). Switch legs.

BACK
Sit with the roller behind you. Lace your fingers behind your head and lean your upper back onto the roller (a). Tighten your abs and glutes, lie back, and slowly roll up and down your back (b).

CALVES
Sit on the floor with your legs out, hands on the floor behind you. Place the roller just below your knees (a). Roll along your calves from your knees to your ankles (b) and back again.

**On a Roll**
Foam rollers come in a variety of lengths. For ease of use and portability, try the 6X12-inch size.
Hand Massage for Toothache

For a toothache, try a hand massage. Wrap a thin cloth around an ice cube and rub it into the fleshy V-shaped area where the thumb and forefinger meet. Gently hold the ice on the area for 5 to 7 minutes. Amazingly, this technique can ease toothache pain. In one study, ice massage eased toothaches in 60 to 90% of the people who tried it. It works by sending rubbing impulses along the nerve pathways that the toothache pain would normally travel. Because the pathways can carry only one signal at a time, the rubbing impulse outweighs the pain.

DIY Tricks for Pain

Discover how your hands can make you feel better fast.

For a toothache

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For side stitches

Massage your diaphragm. Like any muscle, the diaphragm needs to be warmed up before it exercises. So before you stretch your legs, give your diaphragm a breath massage and get it in working order. Sit on the floor and place one hand on your chest, the other on your belly. As you breathe, both hands should move up and down, indicating that you’re using your full breathing capacity, including your diaphragm, because a warmed diaphragm is less likely to stitch.

For denture pain

Massage your gums. Place your thumb and index finger over your gums (index on...
the outside of your gums) and massage them. This promotes circulation and gives your gums a healthy firmness.

**For shin splints**
“For shin splints in the front of the leg, you want to massage the area right near the edge of the shin—not directly on it,” says masseur Rich Phaigh. “If you work right on the bone, it just seems to make the inflammation worse.”

**For pinkeye**
Try massage. “Nasal massage can help to unblock the duct that drains the eye’s tears into the nose,” says Ken Haller, MD. “A blockage can cause eye irritation or prevent a small infection from clearing itself up.” Place your thumb and index finger just below the bridge of the nose—where the pads of eyeglasses would rest—and gently massage the area.

**For nighttime muscle cramps**
Few things hurt worse than a charley horse—the searing pain of a calf muscle cramp that can wake you from the dead of sleep.

What happened? Basically, your calf muscle got stuck. Leg muscles contract when you turn or stretch during sleep. When a muscle stays contracted, a sudden cramp can result.

To stop the cramp and, hopefully, head off a recurrence later in the night, try massaging your calf by rubbing upward from the ankle. (If night cramps are a constant problem, you may want to do this before you go to bed.)

**Hands-On Beauty**
When it comes to rubdowns, your back, shoulders, and feet hog all the attention. But anyone who has ever had the pleasure of a scalp or face massage will be happy to know that top-floor TLC has benefits beyond simply feeling blissful. “Massage increases blood flow, which plumps up slack skin, encourages lymphatic drainage (the shuttling of toxins out and away from cells so that more nutrients can travel in), and adds vitality to a dull complexion and lackluster hair,” says Kimara Ahnert, owner of the Kimara Ahnert skin care studio in New York City. Here’s how you can re-create a therapist’s handiwork at home.

**Face**

**WHY IT HELPS**
Steady, rhythmic pressure in certain areas leads the blood to fully infuse the skin tissue, leaving it nourished and glowing, says Catherine Raubiet, education director for Lierac Paris. Rubbing upward can also prevent wrinkles and stop skin from sagging.

**HOW OFTEN TO DO**
Every day, unless you have very sensitive skin or a condition like rosacea, which can become aggravated by too much fussing, says Raubiet.

**WHAT TO USE**
A facial serum’s long-lasting slickness can help avoid tugging on the fragile skin around your eyes. No serum on hand? Regular moisturizer is a worthy stand-in.

**DIY**
“Start with a generous amount of serum or moisturizer,” says Silvana Mos, an aesthetician at the Kimara Ahnert studio in Greenwich, CT. Face your palms inward and hold them horizontally. With upward strokes, one hand quickly following the other, massage your cheeks and neck from left to right. Next, apply pressure with your middle fingers to the inner corners of your eyes and circle around the sockets three times. Then use your middle fingers to draw small heart shapes from left to right on your forehead. Finish by applying gentle, steady pressure on your temples with your middle and ring fingers.

**Head and Scalp**

**WHY IT HELPS**
Many women spend hours on their hair but totally neglect their scalp. Big mistake. “The health and vitality of your scalp is the foundation of your hair’s growth and health,” says Elizabeth Cunnane-Phillips, a trichologist at the Philip Kingsley Trichological Centre in New York City. Massaging the scalp helps boost blood flow, which can reduce dandruff.

**HOW OFTEN TO DO**
A few minutes of nogggin kneading a day relaxes and revives your head, says Kenneth Milstead, lead aesthetician at Bliss 49 in New York City. If you have serious scalp irritation or eczema, stick to once a week.

**WHAT TO USE**
Set down your brush and steer clear of those gimmicky scalp massagers, advises Cunnane-Phillips. While the little nibs on these items feel good, they can lead to tangles. Opt for a nonmechanical method, such as the Philip Kingsley Scalp Mask (philipkingsley.com), which has a menthol base to further enhance circulation and decrease flaking. If your hair isn’t already wet, coat it with a rich conditioner before you start massaging. “It will reduce the friction that can roughen up the cuticles and cause split ends,” says Cunnane-Phillips.

**DIY**
Using all 10 fingers, start at your temples and gently but firmly massage your head in a circular motion. “Don’t scrub or rub the hair together—the process should be nearly silent to minimize damage,” says Cunnane-Phillips. Continue working upward through the front of your hairline and then move back toward the crown, ending at the nape of your neck. Repeat three times for 5 minutes total.
**Acupressure**

Traditional Chinese medicine practitioners believe that the body’s vital energy, or qi, flows along invisible channels called meridians; blockages cause pain and disease. Unlike acupuncture, which uses needles, acupressure uses a steady, static pressure from fingers for pain relief. Research indicates that this pressure applied to acupoints releases natural painkillers called endorphins and may block the transmission of pain signals along nerves. Some studies suggest it eases stress, insomnia, nausea, and fatigue as well as pain.

### What Research Shows
University of Michigan investigators taught 39 college students the location of acupressure points believed to be either stimulating or relaxing (the students weren’t told which were which). After establishing the volunteers’ baseline alertness, the researchers had them attend 3 days of yawn-inducing lectures. At lunchtime on the first day, half of the students pressed stimulating acupoints; the next 2 days, they pressed the relaxation ones. (The other students did the opposite.) On the days the students used the stimulation technique, they reported feeling significantly more alert than when they followed the relaxation routine.

### Press Here for Relief
Before you reach for a painkiller, try one of these acupressure moves.

**For stress**
The next time you feel stressed, try this DIY technique: Place the tips of your fingers under the ledge of your right and left collarbone and apply gentle pressure. Wait for the pulse from your body pushing against your fingers to become synchronized on both sides. You should feel a sense of relaxation.

**For a headache**
Start by applying pressure to the webbing between your thumb and index finger, says Bryn Clark, an acupressure practitioner as well as a licensed acupuncturist. “You’ll feel a bundle of tightness because this is a focal point for everything going on in your head, whether it’s a headache, toothache, or jaw pain,” he explains. Next, move to the site of the headache. Use firm pressure and a circular movement.

Another key pressure point for reducing headache pain is under the bony bumps next to the ears on the back of the head. Use your thumbs to apply pressure there.

**For nausea**
Firmly press the spot on your wrist two finger widths down from the horizontal line at the base of your palm, says Philadelphia acupuncturist Marshall Sager, DO. In a Cochrane review of 40 studies, acupressure was found to be just as effective as anti-nausea medication at easing postoperative nausea.

**For neck pain**
Place one of your hands flat on a table and raise your middle finger, says Sager. Apply pressure to the first joint below your nail. If the pain is in the back of your neck, center the pressure on the top of your finger. If it’s on the side, press the side of your finger that corresponds to the side of your neck pain.

**For constipation**
Try acupressure for constipation—it takes only two fingers and less than 2 minutes. Using your index and middle fingers, apply firm pressure on the outside of your leg, about 3 inches below the kneecap, for 5 seconds and then release for 10 seconds. Repeat 5 times.

**For cramps**
Research suggests that acupressure stimulates blood flow and releases endorphins, the body’s natural painkillers.

In a Taiwanese study, 69 young women were given 20 minutes of either acupressure or bed rest at the first twinge of menstrual pain. Therapists pressed the point SP6, located three fingers above the ankle bone on the inside of the leg, in the center. Thumb pressure was applied for 6 seconds, released for 2 seconds, and repeated during two 5-minute cycles on each leg. The women who received acupressure reported feeling 40% less pain, compared with a 26% reduction for those on bed rest.

**For more energy**
Apply very firm pressure to these five stimulating acupoints with your thumb or index and middle fingers; hold each for 3 minutes, massaging in both directions:
1. The base of the skull, one finger-width to the side of the spine
2. The pad between the joint of the thumb and index finger
3. The sole of the foot, one-third of the way from the toes
4. The top center of the head
5. The outside of the leg bone, 3 inches down from the kneecap

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