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Massages used to be so simple: a 20-minute pamper to pummel away tension and exhaustion. But with our ever-increasing desire for complementary healing (we spend £1.6 billion a year in Britain on alternative therapies), exotic massages are cropping up everywhere. And, rather than just helping us unwind, they're claiming to cure a whole host of woes, from depression to insomnia. But how do they work? And can they really help to heal us a bit like a medicine?

'Most of these types of massage don't have clinical evidence to back them, but many are very effective,' says Dr Malcolm Vandenburg, co-author of *Positive Under Pressure* (£9.99, Avenue). 'Massage is good at treating specific physical problems. It relaxes muscles and stimulates blood flow, helping tissue to heal.'

But it isn't suitable for everything. 'If you have an acute injury that's still on the mend, a deep tissue massage could do more harm, so consult your GP,' warns Dr Vandenburg. 'And always tell a practitioner if you're pregnant – to practise safely, they should ask you these questions, too.'

Here our readers describe the massage they chose and explain the effect it had on their health problems.



'Tui Na therapy is helping me avoid an MS relapse'

STEPHANIE BEN-ARROS, 30

THE MESSAGE: An important part of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Tui Na is the most widely practised form of massage in the world. The technique claims to work by balancing energy lines called meridians.

WHY I TRIED IT: 'Since being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in November 2006, I've noticed I develop symptoms whenever I'm stressed or emotional. I wanted to see if this form of therapy would help stabilise my moods, and prevent symptoms of MS such as pins and needles and muscle weakness. I hoped this kind of technique would slow down the deterioration of my nervous system, too.'

VERDICT: 'I've had five sessions. Morgane, my practitioner at Urban Bliss in London, works through my whole body, beginning with gentle strokes on my belly. Using her fingers, hands and elbows, the massage is sometimes soft and soothing, and at other times deep and painful. She finishes with a nurturing head massage, which feels amazing.'

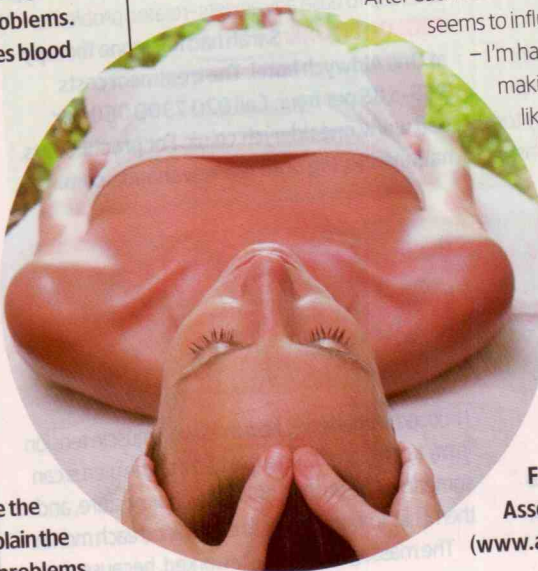
After each session I feel relaxed and more positive, and this seems to influence how I cope with the rest of the week

– I'm handling stress better, I think, therefore making the chances of my MS flaring up less likely. I get very tense around my diaphragm but have noticed that the treatment helps me breathe more easily, too.'

DR VANDENBERG SAYS: 'Traditional Chinese Medicine has an overall reputation for being effective. Tui Na claims to be helpful for chronic pain, muscular problems, migraines, irritable bowel syndrome and emotional imbalances.'

FIND OUT MORE: Call Urban Bliss on 020 8969 3331. One session costs £55.

For practitioners nationwide, contact The Association for Traditional Chinese Medicine (www.atcm.co.uk; 020 8361 2121).



'Thai Yoga Massage is starting to clear my 10-year cough'

JOANNA RAHIM, 41

THE MESSAGE: Claimed to have been developed by the Buddha's physician over 2,000 years ago, this massage is 'yoga without the effort'. The masseuse skilfully stretches you into a range of yogic positions, while stimulating pressure points with her hands and feet.

WHY I TRIED IT: 'After trying inhaled steroids, doctors told me they had no way of treating the chronic cough I've been living with for 10 years. It's been so bad that on more than one occasion taxi drivers have heard the hacking sounds of my lungs and offered to take me to hospital – I sounded like I had TB! I turned to Thai

Yoga Massage on the recommendation of a friend who said it might help.'

VERDICT: 'After four hour-long sessions, I feel transformed. Kira Balaskas, who teaches Thai Yoga Massage at London's Kailash Centre, stretched my body into a whole range of positions. Walking her feet up and down my back, she pulled my shoulders and stretched out my chest, loosening the muscles around my sternum and neck.'

Something is working as my cough has improved – I haven't had any remarks about my coughing in public, which is a rarity. And now I can have a conversation without my hacking interrupting.'

DR VANDENBERG SAYS: 'This technique combines general massage with deep stretches of the muscles and ligaments. It's good for relaxing muscles, stimulating circulation and lowering heart rate and blood pressure. Also, there's evidence to show that stretching techniques such as this could help with autism.'

FIND OUT MORE: Call the Kailash Centre on 020 7722 3939 or visit www.kailashcentre.org. One session costs £55. For general info, go to www.thaiyogamassage.co.uk. For practitioners nationwide, log onto www.wahanda.com.

