

How Massage Fits Into Long Term Rehab

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As we know, there are many benefits of massage, but do they play a role in the rehabilitation of musculoskeletal injuries?

This article explores what rehabilitation is and the benefit of massage in this process. We will also look at two common injuries, general recovery time, a typical rehabilitation program, and long-term rehabilitation.

The Importance of Rehabilitation

“Rehabilitation is the action of restoring someone to health or normal life through training and therapy after imprisonment, addiction or illness” (Oxford Dictionary).

This article will be covering the ‘illness’ (injury) aspect.

Keeping our bodies balanced and in good working order helps us maintain a good quality of life. Anyone who has suffered an injury can testify as to how inconvenient injury and pain can be! In a lot of cases, poorly managed injury and pain can lead to long-term dysfunctions, preventing the individual ever returning back to normal.

Rehabilitation is your best chance for your body returning to normal. Doing nothing will typically mean long-term pain, dysfunction, and possible disability.

Benefits of Massage

The benefits of massage include:

- Improved blood and lymphatic flow
- Reduction in pain
- Improved movement
- Reduction in stress and tension
- Improved proprioception

These benefits support successful rehabilitation. Pain reduces movement naturally because moving hurts when you injure yourself! Injury creates damage to muscles, tendons, ligaments, bones, skin and other soft tissues, which the body is trying to repair. By applying massage therapy, we improve the blood flow to areas that are often restricted, which in turn speeds up the healing process. If we are constantly stressed and in pain, our body creates tension in muscles, which restricts blood flow. Reducing pain reduces stress (cortisol), creating a more relaxed body with the parasympathetic nervous system in charge of 'rest and digest', and recovery.

When massage is applied in conjunction with specific rehabilitation protocols, we can enhance the effectiveness of those programs.

For example, if a specific protocol requires strength training, massage can improve the recovery time after that bout of exercise, so the client is able to train again sooner, meaning an improved rate of strength increase.

Another example could be improving the stability of a joint. Massaging the area can improve the body's proprioception (our brain knowing where our limbs are at any given time), which in turn enhances our body's ability to stabilise itself.

Massage should rarely be used on its own for rehabilitation. It is a 'complementary' medicine, in other words, it should be used with other holistic modalities, and if necessary, medications, drugs or surgery. In the hands of a skilled remedial massage therapist, you can complement other allied health professionals and their treatments for better client care and rehabilitation.

Common Conditions and Suggested Rehab Plans

Below are a couple of common musculoskeletal injuries to give you an idea of how they are treated, how long rehabilitation can take and how massage can assist in the rehabilitation program.

Secondary Shoulder impingement

Damage to the supraspinatus tendon due to compression in the sub-acromial space from dysfunctional shoulder mechanics.

Rehab duration: Weeks to months

Summary of rehabilitation plan: Focus on strengthening the rotator cuff muscles, restoration of normal range of motion and pain control using heat and cold.

Role of massage: Relaxation, deep tissue, myofascial release and other neuromuscular techniques can be applied to the muscles and fascia acting on the shoulder to assist in restoring strength, range of motion and controlling pain.

Tennis Elbow

An overuse injury, commonly straining the extensor carpi radialis brevis muscle at the lateral epicondyle of the humerus (lateral epicondylitis).

Rehab duration: 6 to 12+ months

Summary of rehabilitation plan: Progressive slow, repetitive wrist and forearm stretching, muscle conditioning, occupational exercises, and physical therapy.

Role of massage: Cross fibre friction and muscle energy techniques would be particularly useful when assisting with the end goal for tennis elbow rehabilitation.

Long-term Rehabilitation

Whether the rehabilitation is short-term or long-term, massage will need to be a long-term intervention. Initially it will complement the initial specialist care (GP, Physio, Osteo, etc) after which it should continue as a prevention measure for the original condition. It will also look holistically to treat dysfunctions in other areas of the body.

Cost can be a big factor contributing to whether rehabilitation is successful or not, especially at the onset of the condition. However, in the long-term it comes down to the quality of life you want now and in the future. Ongoing massage treatments shouldn't be viewed as a luxury, but a necessity for long-term health, along with physical activity and good nutrition.

A good remedial therapist should be teaching you how to look after yourself which will reduce the cost of maintaining optimal health and make you accountable for your own body.

"The greatest medicine of all is teaching people how not to need it" - Hippocrates

ABOUT

Chris is a Massage Coach at The Australian Institute of Fitness Brisbane

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