

The Benefits of Self-Massage

Visiting a masseur can be expensive and an inefficient use of time. You can actually massage yourself in the comfort of your own living room. **Charlene Hutsebaut** tells us how.

Many of us who lead busy, active lives can benefit from calming, restorative practices such as massage. For some, time and cost can be prohibitive. Learning how to do self-massage of different types, however, can break down these barriers. As someone who has massaged many clients and elite athletes over the years, I can recommend several tips and tools to guide you. First, let's look at the benefits.

Benefits of self-massage

Most of the body's systems can benefit from massage. Here are my top benefits of self-massage:

- Free.
- Time-effective.
- Can help to improve posture.
- Aids in dispersing waste products from the muscle tissues
- Improves muscle flexibility.
- Gives calming time for those with busy lives.
- Stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, which allows the body's systems to slow down, allowing for repair and renewal time. This in turn allows for better breathing.
- Improves mobility by stimulating warming-up and also release of new synovial fluid into joints, making them move more smoothly.

Self-massage techniques

On the parts of the body that we can easily reach ourselves, we can perform either effleurage (broad sweeping moves), or myofascial release.

Effleurage can feel very relaxing and soothing: let's use an example of massaging a forearm, because it is an easily reachable area. Start at the inside of the wrist and following the line of the muscles, stroke upwards towards the elbow with the heel of the opposite hand. It is important to always massage in a direction which goes back towards the heart, which promotes good venous return and thus clearance of toxins. Now try massaging the front of your thigh in a seated or lying position with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Here you can use both hands to perform the sweeping motion, coming up from the knee towards the hip. See what feels best for the motion; either the heels of the hands or the full hand including fingers. It's smart to alternate which parts of the hand you are using (even try the forearm here), because it protects against overuse of the fingers and wrist.

Myofascial release is different, in that you are aiming

for a specific trigger point in a muscle. These trigger points can cause muscle tightness and much pain - either specific or referred. They are fairly easy to find if you stroke over a muscle group, feeling for any tender points. Once you have found a trigger point, you can massage with whatever feels best for you - finger, thumb, heel of hand or elbow. You can use gentle, even pressure down on the point, small kneading strokes back and forth, or even circular motions. Be sure to monitor the pressure you are using and how long you hold it, especially if you're dealing with an acutely injured area: gentle is always best if it's a new injury. The pressure should feel like a 'good pain' that you can handle, rather than one that feels intensely painful where you are likely to be gritting your teeth.

Self-massage tools

Tennis ball - there are many new and innovative tools that can be used for self-massage and mobility work. The most cost-effective are a tennis ball or a small massage ball. These can be rolled on trigger points or used in a similar effleurage stroking movement back and forth up a muscle group. Some physiotherapists suggest that rolling a tennis ball under the arch of the foot helps to lengthen

and ease tension on the posterior back line of the leg and up into the hip. This is therefore a nice little tool for those with tight hamstrings. Online, there are excellent resources for tennis ball placement on various trigger points.

Foam rollers give a more even overall self-massage than a tennis ball will, which can get right into a trigger point. You can roll over an area of tightness or irritation with an evenly distributed pressure. Whatever expanse you are massaging with a roller, you will need to be able to support yourself on your arms or legs/hips on the floor, while you work the muscle group. For example, if working the roller on the glutes or side of the hip, you will be on the floor supported by the top leg and massaging the bottom leg/hip. You'll need to also stabilise yourself on an elbow and forearm. When massaging the back, you can lie on the roller (facing the ceiling with the roller across your back under you), lift your hips off the floor and support yourself on your

Self-massage tools

- Foam roller
- Acupressure trigger point balls
- Tennis ball
- Small prickly ball
- Rumble Roller
- The Grid

“Massage is a conversation with your nervous system. So you want it to have the right tone. Friendly and helpful! Not shouty and rude”.

Paul Ingraham,
massage therapist and writer



feet, while you push the roller back and forth up and down the back. The bonus for you in foam roller movements is that you will be working your core muscles to lend support to the position. Whatever muscle group you decide to massage, you can determine how intense the pressure is by taking more or less of your body weight into the roller.

Rumble rollers - some reviews state that a regular foam roller breaks down more quickly than a new product called a *Rumble Roller*, which is made of waterproof and latex-free materials. This is great for personal trainers or gyms that will have many clients using the same tool. They are covered with multiple bumps and come in two different sizes and densities. *Rumble Rollers* will definitely be a step up from a foam roller, because you can roll in numerous directions on a denser base, thus increasing intensity. Another version of this is *The Grid*, which has certain raised zones to try and stimulate a deeper massage.

There are many self-massage techniques and tools, including using our own hands/arms, foam rollers and their new cousins the *Rumble Roller* and *Grid*, tennis balls and their new incarnations. Whatever your choice, it is important to remember to monitor the intensity you are using with body pressure, length of time of massaging each session and regularity of use. With any health method, though, it is a great value to you to speak first with a professional for advice on your needs and goals. They will be able to coach you on best practices that are safe and effective. You can then go out to build your own self-massage habits. [tsn](#)

Suggested professionals

- Glenn Sontag – osteopath and massage therapist
www.blue-eye.co.uk/glenn-sontag/
Twitter: @blueeyeoste
- Caroline Kremer – Bowen Technique
www.carolinekremer.com
Twitter: @carolinekremer
- Jo Nighy – massage therapist
www.urban-bliss.com
- Sean Durkin – osteopath
www.queensclub.co.uk/sports/health_and_fitness/fitness_services

References

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- Basic Self-Massage Tips for Myofascial Trigger Points - Learn how to massage your own trigger points (muscle knots). Paul Ingraham
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