

[ focus on ]

# HEALING HANDS

There's nothing new about massages but with more varied versions of the concept to choose from, **Sam Lewis** looks at the best of western massages

A FEW DECADES ago, anyone booking a regular massage was either rich or famous. But high society, A-list celebrities and athletes aren't the only ones with shoulders meeting their ears and necks so tight they could snap.

Today, an increasing number of us consider massage to be an integral part of our lives. And while everyone loves a massage, one person's luxury is another's essential: some people gain pleasure, others insist this ancient art has health benefits, too. But can it really cure acute back pains, stress, sleeping disorders, migraines, digestive disorders and other common ailments?

History would suggest massage has been practised for thousands of years. Dating back to around 3000 BC, its benefits have been eschewed from many famous doctors throughout the ages. In Rome, the famous physician Galen was an advocate of massage to eliminate waste products from the body and relieve fatigue; in the 19th century, Henrik Ling brought us the Swedish massage.

While eastern massage addresses energy flow and balance within the body, stimulating and soothing specific points along the energy meridians, in the western world most massages are based on an understanding of anatomy, pathology, and physiology by working on the digestive, nervous and musculoskeletal systems. Studies show massage can help improve circulation, eliminate toxins, relax, tone and soothe your muscles while also relieving stiffness and sometimes pain.

Most traditional massage is associated with the Swedish version, however, more contemporary western massage techniques include deep tissue, sports massage, trigger point therapy and myofascial release (soft tissue therapy).

While no one can say hand on heart it will help you, this knowledge gives those of us who want to book our next massage a good excuse, and others who are in pain, some degree of hope. But with so many different types around, which ones do you choose?

Susan Findlay from the General Council of Massage Therapy says: "Every practitioner develops their own style but the end result is to give you wellbeing. Clients have to decide whether they want a relaxing massage, a rehabilitative session or one that may help improve an athlete's training."

Here are four different types of massage commonplace at spas and hotels in Europe to help you decide which would suit you ... >

## DID YOU KNOW?

The word massage is thought to have originated from the ancient Greek word *massin* meaning to knead or the Arabic word *mash'h*, meaning to press softly. Advocated by Hippocrates, 'the father of medicine', many famous historical figures, including Julius Caesar, are believed to have indulged in the treatment.

## BEST FOR... RELAXATION

### Swedish massage

▷ **The process:** In Sweden, this simply denotes a 'standard' full body massage and today it's considered the most common type in the western world. Many other types of massages, such as sports, also incorporate the main techniques including kneading, friction, stretching and, sometimes, *tapotement* where the body is tapped rhythmically with fingers or the sides of the hands.

Effleurage is a series of long guiding strokes over the surface of the body, used to warm up skin before deeper techniques are used. The strokes are made toward the torso to help guide blood back to the heart. Most therapists will use massage oils to aid smooth strokes. Whereas effleurage provokes relaxation, other movements such as *petrissage* (kneading, rolling and squeezing) will help relieve tension, promoting deep relaxation in the tissues and muscles. Friction, *tapotement* and shaking or vibrating the muscles are some of the other techniques used. Pressure ranges from light to firm concentrating on a single finger or thumb. If you want deep pressure to tackle specific pain or injury, sports massage is usually a better option.

▷ **The benefits:** Most commonly this type of massage is incredibly calming and can make you feel more relaxed and less stressed. But it can also help improve circulation by increasing oxygen flow in the blood and helping the body eliminate toxins. It can relax, tone and soothe muscles and also relieve stiffness and sometimes pain. Some people believe it strengthens the immune system, too.

▷ **The details:** From around £40-£80 for an hour. For details of your nearest practitioner, contact the General Council for Massage Therapies. [www.gcmt.org.uk](http://www.gcmt.org.uk)



### DID YOU KNOW?

Having a sauna before you get a massage can loosen up muscles, helping therapists work the parts of the body that need it the most.

## BEST FOR... REHABILITATION & TRAINING

### Sports massage

▷ **The process:** Sports massages can vary enormously and often incorporate a whole range of techniques to manage, manipulate and rehabilitate soft tissue including muscles, ligaments and tendons. Typically, it involves a massage using forearms, elbows, knuckles and thumbs. However, a good therapist will often include other techniques such as trigger point therapy and myofascial release.

▷ **The benefits:** Firstly, you don't have to be an athlete. Most fans of sports massage are normal active people with repetitive strain injuries or stress-related problems, according to Sports Massage Works in London, while others may take part in low-level sports and get common injuries such as groin or hamstring strain or shin splints. This type of massage can release muscular trauma and tension, stretching the muscles, ligaments and fascia so muscles can lengthen and the body can realign itself. It can also remodel scar tissue

after injury and stimulate blood circulation, aiding the disposal of metabolic and other waste after activity. Athletes sometimes use it to reduce recovery periods, while others use it pre-competition to prevent injury. Used in conjunction with more advanced myofascial and structural integration techniques, sports massage can also assist in correcting posture and muscle balance. Finally, while the benefits are often physical, don't underestimate the psychological effects. It's not always comfortable, but most people feel more invigorated or relaxed afterwards.

▷ **The details:** Some people will benefit from one visit but most require several sessions to see an improvement. Prices vary but cost £45 for one hour at Sports Massage Works in Camden. For more advice, or for details of your nearest accredited practitioner, contact the Sports Massage Association. [www.sportsmassageassociation.org](http://www.sportsmassageassociation.org) >

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## BEST FOR... KNOTS

### Trigger point therapy

▷ **The process:** The therapist applies pressure directly on a trigger point for a short period of time until the pain lessens. Knots arise from painful, irritated areas in muscles caused by accidents, everyday stress and tension or sport, where lactic acid builds up causing decreased circulation, inflammation and pain. The pressure helps break up muscle fibres and release toxins that have built up.

▷ **Benefits:** It can lead to immediate pain relief. However, trigger points can also be referred pain, when a nerve is pinched or a bone is out of place. The muscles will send a pain signal where there isn't necessarily an injury, causing referred pain. If this is the case, the knot isn't the underlying problem and the therapist needs to discover the root.

▷ **The details:** From around £35-£65 for an hour depending on if you visit a clinic or a spa. Evasion Phuket's Six Senses spa in Thailand offers an hour for £65.

## BEST FOR... MOOD ENHANCEMENT

### Aromatherapy massage

▷ **The process:** Plants and herbs have been used for their medicinal qualities for centuries but it was in France that aromatherapy developed into the form we know today. Often used in mainstream medicine, it uses essential oils from aromatic plants.

Once diffused in the air, they can also be applied to the skin in dilute form, for example during massage, or can be inhaled. The aroma of the oil has been shown to stimulate balancing centres in the nose and parts of the brain, with massage and inhalation allowing oils to be absorbed into the bloodstream. Most aromatherapy massages use light pressure and sweeping movements to relax. However, depending on the type of oil used, it can also be invigorating. Therapists usually discuss what you're trying to achieve before presenting a choice of oils to choose according to scent.

▷ **Benefits:** Still being fiercely debated in many camps, most agree it's a good mood enhancer but whether this is to do with the relaxing nature of the actual massage or the inhalation of aromas is yet to be proved. Jasmine is said to be a good mood lifter, quashing anxiety and depression, while lavender has sedative effects, making it a great balancer of the nervous and emotional systems.

▷ **The details:** Expect to pay anything from £30-£80 for an hour. Champneys offers a 25-minute back massage for £35. □



## FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT...

### Russian massage

A Russian massage is similar to a deep tissue treatment and involves a massage with cups, followed by the application of honey which is massaged into the skin using the basic strokes of stretching, kneading motions and gliding.

Cupping is said to increase blood flow to muscles, drain excess fluid and toxins and help treat cellulite, while the honey is thought to improve your skin tone. The whole procedure can also control physical and mental stress.