Three recent studies have provided strong evidence that massage can reduce pain. This article gives you the numbers—and suggests ways you can use this information to your advantage.

By JoAnn Milivojevic
This past year, the American Massage Therapy Association focused its attention on discovering how the general public and the health-care community view and use massage therapy to reduce pain. Three surveys validated what massage therapists know to be experientially true—massage reduces pain. The results further indicate that massage is no longer thought of as luxury afforded to athletes and the wealthy. Rather, massage is considered a valuable therapy in relieving and managing chronic and acute pain.

The work of massage therapists is entering a new rank of acceptance among many in society, as recently illustrated in three separate surveys. Two surveys were sponsored by AMTA, and a third by the American Hospital Association (AHA). This article takes an in-depth look at what these surveys mean for massage therapists, consumers and the health-care community.

Chronic Pain—The Plague Of Many
Chronic pain is defined as pain that persists for longer than a month, and is either sporadic or constant. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), more than one-third of all Americans will suffer from chronic pain at some point in their lives, and approximately 14 percent of all employees take time off from work due to pain.

Chronic pain clearly diminishes quality of life for sufferers and affects those around them. But there are also hefty economic costs. According to the Chronic Pain Association, U.S. companies lose an estimated $90 billion each year to sick time, reduced productivity and direct medical and other benefit costs due to chronic pain among employees. Massage therapists have a role to play in both reducing a person’s suffering and in making employees more productive.

“Because massage therapy does help with the pain, stiffness and soreness that accompanies chronic pain, it does make the quality of a person’s life better,” says AMTA President Brenda L. Griffith. “And, obviously if you’re not in pain you’re more productive, and a more valuable commodity to your employee.”

Communicating how massage works to reduce pain will help your current and prospective clients become better informed. For example, let people know that massage focuses on the entire body system and its relationship to soft tissue—not solely on the site of pain. The benefits of massage for pain relief also help patients become more aware of their bodies and the sources of pain. It impacts patients by virtue of human touch and improves confidence by encouraging patients to effectively cope with their pain.

Where And Why It Hurts
The NIH cites that most common chronic pain complaints are due to headache, low back pain, cancer and arthritis. The AMTA member survey of clients concurs with this national statistic. Many of the most common complaints listed by the NIH are the very reasons people seek out massage therapists. And about half the people polled said they’ve had their pain for more than 12 months, meeting the definition of chronic.

As far as the reason for the pain, the AMTA survey shows that 26 percent were the result of strain, such as from lifting a heavy object; 22 percent said it stemmed from an accident or injury. Meanwhile, 21 percent reported
headaches were the bane of their discomfort. The sites of pain parallel the source, and include areas such as lower and upper back, neck and shoulders.

**Massage Proven To Relieve Pain**

The efficacy of massage therapy for pain is clear in all three surveys. In the AMTA member survey, of the people who reported having received massage previously for the same ailment, 74 percent said the massage temporarily reduced the pain; 14 percent said it completely eliminated it. These numbers verify what respondents said when they were asked about their satisfaction with their massage session—88 percent said they were very satisfied. An overwhelming number of people—96 percent—said they would seek massage to reduce their pain again.

Although this information may seem like common knowledge to some, there is value in methodically surveying real people’s experiences. Now we have real data massage therapists can use instead of vague assumptions,” says Ron Precht, AMTA communications manager.

“This data clearly shows that massage does indeed reduce pain for a vast majority of people. In fact, many clients say it works better than other therapies they have tried.”

When asked which therapies gave them the greatest relief, the client survey ranked massage the highest at 65 percent. Medication was next with 14 percent, followed by chiropractic therapy with 13 percent.

The AMTA consumer survey, which polled a random population in August 2003, revealed similar results. The general population ranked massage just behind medication as the most sought-after form of pain relief. Ninety-one percent of respondents agree that massage can be effective in reducing pain, and for those who received massage for pain relief, 96 percent would do so again. (These findings are derived from the survey commissioned from the Opinion Research Corporation International; although this information may seem like common knowledge to some, there is value in methodically surveying real people’s experiences. Now we have real data massage therapists can use instead of vague assumptions.)

---

**The Nature Of Pain**

About 50 percent of the 1,993 people polled reported having their pain for more than a year. Common reasons included strain, accidents or injuries, and headaches. Lower and upper back, neck and shoulders are where most people say their pain resides.

Source: AMTA Member Survey
Health-Care Community Says Yes To Massage

Massage is no longer a distant cousin to other pain relief therapies. The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations has suggested massage therapy as one means to manage pain without the use of pharmaceuticals. That’s especially good news for anyone who has difficulty tolerating pain medication. More and more medical practitioners are reading about the efficacy of massage in peer magazines, increasing their awareness of massage benefits. Several noted journals included the AMTA press release on pain and massage in their pages, including Health and Medicine Work, Pain and Central Nervous System Work and Managed Care Weekly Digest.

The acceptance of massage for pain is obvious in an online medical dictionary published by the University of Miami School of Medicine, which defines massage as the following: “The therapeutic practice of manipulating the muscles and limbs to ease tension and reduce pain. … Massage can be highly effective for reducing the symptoms of arthritis, back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and other disorders of the muscles and/or nervous system.”

Many of these ailments are chronic issues for which massage is an ideal, noninvasive pain reduction solution. This rising acceptance of massage in the health-care community means we’re seeing an increase in the number of massage therapists who work in and for hospitals and health-care organizations each year. Working in these settings presents both unique challenges and rewards. Organizations each year. Working in these settings presents both unique challenges and rewards. Organizations each year. Working in these settings presents both unique challenges and rewards.

The recent AHA study about the use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies shows that stress and pain reduction were the main reasons why patients and hospital staff sought massage therapy. Among the 1,007 hospitals responding, nearly 82 percent of the hospitals offering CAM therapies included massage therapy among their health-care offerings, with more than 70 percent utilizing massage therapy for pain management and relief. People with cancer, pregnant women and those seeking general pain management were the ones who requested massage most often.

“The fact that massage has been validated is helpful to the consumer,” notes Griffith. “It will help those who have been reticent to see that the medical community is embracing massage as part of mainstream wellness.”

Indeed, massage therapy is popping up everywhere, from day spas to chiropractic offices. It’s even helping dental patients with temporomandibular joint (TMJ) disorders. These small joints allow such functions as chewing, speaking and swallowing. According to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research of the National Institutes of Health, 10.8 million people in the United States suffer from TMJ problems. Griffith recount’s her recent experience at the dentist when she had to be fitted for a mouth guard—she was grinding her teeth at night. “My dentist told me I was [the] third person that he fitted that day,” explains Griffith. “He said fittings for bite guards have skyrocketed, and that they think it’s [linked to] the stress level that society is living with today. Massage is a wonderful therapy for folks to deal with stress they’re aware of, and stress they’re not aware of, such as grinding teeth at night.”

Griffith adds that since not all health-care practitioners are aware of massage’s value for easing pain, that massage therapists can educate health-care providers by sharing the information gleaned from these recent studies.

Who Uses Massage Therapy?

Many people already know that massage therapy helps relieve muscle soreness. AMTA’s latest consumer survey reveals that more people than ever are seeking massage, specifically to manage and relieve pain. The AMTA consumer survey shows that nearly half (47 percent) of those polled had a massage at some point, specifically for pain relief and/or pain management. The percentage is even higher (58 percent) among 18 to 24-year-olds, as well as those aged 35 to 44. Furthermore, 91 percent of adults polled agreed that massage therapy can be an effective pain reducer.

Among senior citizens responding to the consumer survey, 83 percent believed massage can be effective in reducing pain. This growing acceptance of massage among the general population, as well as increased use in the medical community, creates increasing opportunities for massage therapists.

“This survey information tells us who most commonly seeks out massage therapy for pain relief,” Precht says. “Massage therapists might consider marketing to a specific age group and emphasizing massage for pain relief.”

He also says that massage therapists might visit retirement villages, apartment complexes or social groups that appeal to a targeted age group and educate them on massage for pain relief. Griffith adds that this kind of information also can be shared at corporate wellness days and health fairs.

Massage Works Best

For those clients in the AMTA member-conduct survey who received massage for pain, 74 percent said their pain was temporarily reduced; 63 percent reported that massage worked better than other therapies they had tried, including medication and chiropractic.

“This is especially useful in attracting new clients,” says Precht. “Tell prospects that a recent national survey of massage clients reveals that people who have tried massage for pain have also tried other therapies, and that most people have found massage to be more effective in reducing pain than other methods.”

Precht suggests that this information can be worked into ads, flyers and during conversations with prospects, because some new clients aren’t sure massage will work. “Here are 2,000 people across the country who say massage works; maybe it will work for you, too,” he says. Griffith also recommends educating your clients. “Some may be using massage to just relax,” she says. “Let them know how valuable massage is for reducing pain from injury or chronic conditions.”

These surveys clearly provide validation for what massage therapists already see and know. Now, you can reference statistics rather than relying only on what you’ve seen. Massage can reduce pain. That’s good news to share with family, friends, neighbors and even your own health-care providers.

This rising acceptance of massage in the health-care community means we’re seeing an increase in the number of massage therapists who work in and for hospitals and health-care organizations each year. For more information about the pain surveys mentioned in this article, contact Ron Precht, AMTA communications manager, at rprech@amtamassage.org.