



When Does Massage Actually Help Pain?

A practical 6-page guide for active adults who want to know when massage makes sense, when it may not, and when another evaluation should come first.

Massage is useful in the right situation. It is not a cure-all, and deeper pressure is not automatically better.

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Massage may be worth trying when...

Pain is complicated. No single symptom proves that discomfort is muscular, but certain patterns are more likely to respond to hands-on care.

- **The area feels tight, sore, or restricted**, especially after activity, long periods of sitting, or repetitive use.
- **The discomfort changes with movement or position.** You may feel better after warming up, moving around, stretching gently, or changing posture.
- **You have reduced range of motion** or a guarded, stiff feeling without a recent major injury.
- **Stress seems to turn the volume up.** Your shoulders climb, your jaw tightens, or your back feels braced after a long day.
- **You are recovering from normal training or activity soreness** and want help feeling more comfortable while you continue sensible movement and recovery.

A useful way to think about massage is this: it may help change how an area feels and moves, especially when muscle tension, guarding, activity load, or stress are part of the picture.

That is different from claiming massage can diagnose the source of pain or fix every underlying condition. Bodies, inconveniently, refuse to be that simple.

When massage should not be the first step

Some symptoms deserve medical evaluation before anyone starts trying to “work the knot out.” Massage therapists do not diagnose injuries, neurological problems, infections, or systemic disease.

Get appropriate medical evaluation first if you have:

- **New or progressive numbness, tingling, or weakness**, especially into an arm or leg.
- **Severe or rapidly worsening pain**, or pain that feels very different from your usual aches and soreness.
- **Significant swelling, redness, heat, fever, or signs of infection.**
- **Recent major trauma**, a suspected fracture, dislocation, or significant tissue injury.
- **Unexplained symptoms** that do not make sense with your activity, posture, or movement.
- **Loss of normal function** that is sudden, pronounced, or getting worse.

Massage can sometimes help surrounding muscle tension even when another condition is present. But “massage might help something around it” is not the same as “massage should be the first thing you do.”

If you are unsure, getting evaluated first is the sensible move. There is no prize for guessing.

What massage may realistically help with

Research on massage is mixed depending on the condition, technique, and study design. The most defensible claims are modest: massage can help some people with short-term pain relief, relaxation, perceived muscle tension, soreness, and range of motion.

May help	Should not be promised
Short-term relief from some musculoskeletal pain and soreness	A permanent “fix” for chronic pain
Reducing the feeling of tension or guarding	Breaking up scar tissue by force
Improving comfort with movement or range of motion	Realigning bones or joints
Relaxation and stress reduction	Detoxing the body or flushing “toxins”
Supporting recovery alongside sleep, movement, strength, and sensible training	Replacing exercise, rehabilitation, or medical care when those are needed

The goal is not to convince you that massage is magic. It is to use it where it is useful, with realistic expectations.

How to get more value from massage

Massage tends to work better as part of a broader plan than as a rescue mission every time your body finally starts filing formal complaints.

Tell your therapist what you want to change.

“My neck hurts” is useful. “I want to turn my head more comfortably when I drive” is even better.

Pay attention to response, not pressure.

More pressure is not automatically more effective. The right dose is the one your body tolerates and responds to.

Keep moving when appropriate.

Massage can make movement feel easier, but strength, mobility, walking, training, and ordinary daily movement still matter.

Notice what happens over the next few days.

Did movement improve? Did symptoms settle? Did nothing change? Your response helps decide whether massage belongs in the plan.

Know when to change course.

If symptoms are worsening, becoming more neurological, or not responding as expected, another evaluation may be more useful than repeating the same session.

Massage should support your ability to live, move, work, train, and recover. It should not make you feel dependent on the table.

A quick decision guide

- **Tight, sore, stiff, movement-related, or stress-amplified?** Massage may be worth trying.
- **Normal activity soreness or recovery issue?** Massage may help with comfort and recovery.
- **Sharp, severe, rapidly worsening, neurological, swollen, feverish, or caused by significant trauma?** Get evaluated first.
- **Not sure?** Choose the safer path and get appropriate medical guidance before using massage as the solution.

About Corey Richason, LMT

Corey Richason is the owner of Vital Kneads Massage in Surprise, Arizona. He has practiced massage therapy since 2001 and works primarily with active adults who want less pain, better movement, and a practical approach to recovery. Sessions are customized rather than built around a one-size-fits-all technique.

Vital Kneads Massage

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Important: This guide is educational and is not medical diagnosis or treatment. If symptoms are severe, worsening, unusual, or concerning, seek appropriate medical care.