



The Role of Massage Therapy in the Management of ALS Symptoms

Massage therapy is the manipulation of soft tissues of the body including, muscles, connective tissues, tendons, ligaments and joints. Massage Therapy is a clinically-oriented healthcare option that helps alleviate the discomfort associated with both acute and chronic pain conditions.

Massage therapy can be beneficial for patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease or motor neuron disease. Massage therapy can help the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of those with ALS, and can increase quality of life. Benefits can include the reduction of pain and swelling, increased range of motion, decreased muscle stiffness and cramping, and the management of symptoms associated with depression and anxiety.

Pain Reduction

Massage therapy can reduce muscle pain and pain perception in patients with ALS. Common sites of pain are the skeletal muscles including those in the low back, neck and shoulder areaⁱ. Massage therapy can also help positively affect other characteristics of pain in ALSⁱⁱ relating to the decreasing functional status of the motor neurons.

Range of Motion

The loss of physical mobility has one of the most negative impacts on quality of life for patients with ALSⁱⁱⁱ. Massage therapy is a safe intervention to both passively and actively increase joint mobility and range of motion. Registered Massage Therapists are able to perform passive stretching exercises which can help prevent or reduce pain and increase or maintain function in patients with ALS^{iv}.

Muscle Spasticity, Cramping and Stiffness

Stretching and both passive and active range of motion exercises can be especially helpful in those patients who have spasticity^{iv}. Massage therapy can also help decrease muscle spasm and can help normalize muscle-resting tension^v. Massage therapy is a useful adjunctive treatment for spasticity, avoiding the side effects of common pharmacological treatments.

Edema Reduction

Massage therapy has been proven to decrease venous edema through a therapy called Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD). MLD can increase venous blood flow in the treatment and prevention of venous stasis complications^{vi} and improves clinical stage, hemodynamic parameters and quality of life in patients with chronic venous disease^{vii}. Edema reduction can help to increase comfort in ALS patients suffering from increased swelling resulting from decreased muscle movement.

Depression and Anxiety

Massage therapy can help improve mood and manage the physical symptoms associated with depression and anxiety. Massage therapy has been successful in significantly reducing pulse, respiratory rate, and systolic blood pressure^{viii}, and can affect several other physical symptoms of anxiety. Physiological relaxation is closely tied to immediate reduction in anxiety, and patients' anxiety perception has been found to decrease immediately following massage therapy treatment^{ix}.

Palliative Care

Massage therapy is being increasingly incorporated into hospice and palliative care facilities. Massage therapy can provide relief to some of the more debilitating physical and emotional symptoms faced by patients in palliative care. Used as a complementary therapy, it can help to enhance a person's quality of life and can promote a greater sense of wellbeing for the patient and their caregivers.

Massage Therapy for ALS Patients

Massage therapy is a safe and effective form of healthcare for the management of symptoms associated with ALS. It is a safe, non-invasive, non-drug therapy that can help to improve the quality of life and overall wellbeing of patients with life-limiting illnesses. Registered Massage Therapists are able to adapt and modify treatments to account for patient's lack of mobility or different treatment environments. Registered Massage Therapists can be integrated into the interdisciplinary collaborative healthcare teams to provide an alternative or adjunct healthcare option to manage symptoms associated with ALS.

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