

The Benefits of Breast Massage: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Massage therapy has grown as a profession, and its use in the traditional medical setting is rapidly increasing. Massage therapy has been shown to have positive physical, psychological, and biochemical effects. The aim of this study is to review the reasons patients choose breast massage therapy and the benefits of breast massage therapy.

Ten female patients of 18 years and older participated and completed the survey.

Of the ten patients, the average age was 37.5 years. Most common reasons for choosing breast massage include: improve overall health (90%) and overall well-being (80%), relieve muscle tension (80%), reduce stress (70%), and increase size/firmness/elasticity (70%). Almost all patients reported an improvement in quality of life. Bust size increased for nine patients. Most patients reported a reduction in breast pain, reduction in breast swelling, increase in breast size, increase in breast firmness, improved skin elasticity, improved physical health, improved psychological health, and improved overall health and well-being.

Breast massage has positive effects on physical and psychological health and well-being. Its use is increasingly sought after to improve breast health and overall health and wellness. Physicians, healthcare providers, and patients should consider breast massage therapy as complementary and alternative medicine.

Keywords: massage, massage therapy, breast massage

1. Background

Massage therapy has grown as a profession, and its use in the traditional medical setting is rapidly increasing (Government of Canada). In 2007, it was estimated that annual medical costs for complementary medicine such as massage, totaled \$34 billion in the United States (Nahin, 2009). Massage therapy has been shown to have positive physical, psychological, and biochemical effects (Field, 2016). Studies have shown beneficial effects on varying conditions including pain conditions such as arthritis and fibromyalgia, hypertension, autoimmune conditions such as multiple sclerosis, immune conditions such as cancer, and aging conditions such as dementia (Field, 2016). Its use among breast cancer patients has been beneficial in managing fatigue and lymphedema and improving quality of life and physical functioning (Wang, 2021; Donahue et al., 2023; Greenlee et al., 2017). Breast massage in particular, is increasingly being sought after by patients, and the reasons for choosing breast massage as well as the benefits and outcomes of breast massage therapy among non-cancer patients remain unclear. Its benefits among healthy patients with no underlying medical conditions remain undocumented.

The aim of this study is to review the reasons patients choose breast massage therapy and the benefits of breast massage therapy. This is a pilot study to determine feasibility and interest of patients to participate in the study, as well as provide clarity and direction for a further larger study.

2. Methods

Ten female patients who received breast massage voluntarily consented and completed a survey regarding their reasons for choosing breast massage and outcomes from the breast massage session.

2.1 Study Participants and Study Design

Study Population: Participants were recruited from a single massage therapy facility in the metropolitan city of Vancouver, located in British Columbia, Canada. Female patients age 18 years and older, with no current or previous diagnosis of breast cancer, who received breast massage therapy at the clinic were eligible to participate. Patients do not require referrals for massage or breast massage. Patients are charged a fee per session, although some may have additional insurance coverage for reimbursement. Participation in the study was optional and

voluntary.

Inclusion Criteria: Female patients age 18 years and older, with no current or previous diagnosis of breast cancer, who received breast massage therapy at the clinic were eligible to participate.

Study Design: Patients who consented were asked to complete a self-reported survey following their breast massage session. All collected data was confidential and participants were able to skip any question(s) they did not wish to answer. This project was reviewed by an ethics board prior to enrollment.

2.2 Breast Massage Session

Breast Massage Technique: Each breast massage session lasted 15 minutes and was performed by the same massage practitioner. The specific breast massage technique is unique and includes the neck, chest, and breasts, excluding the nipple and areola. To prepare and relax the patient, a few drops of massage oil was used, and then the massage practitioner started to massage the neck and work their way down to the chest and breast. This technique specifically targets the breast lobes, and the network of lobules connected to the lymphatic system.

Bust Measurements: Bust measurements were taken with a standard tape measure, with both arms relaxed at the sides and the tape measure lined up across the nipple line. Measurements were recorded before the start of the massage session and then again immediately after the massage session.

2.3 Survey

The survey was a self-reported survey containing questions regarding demographics (age, pregnancy status, breast feeding status), reasons for choosing breast massage therapy, and their views about the breast massage therapy session.

To assess reasons for selecting breast massage therapy, patients were asked to check any (or all) reasons from a list of items. Items included: a) reduce breast pain, b) relieve breast pain during pregnancy, c) relieve breast pain during breastfeeding, d) reduce breast swelling/swelling in arms/chest, e) increase breast size/firmness/skin elasticity, f) breast cancer detection, g) relieve muscle tension, h) reduce stress, i) improve overall health, and j) improve overall well-being.

To assess their views about breast massage therapy, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with various statements using a Likert scale (strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree). Questions included: How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Breast massage has... a) reduced my breast pain, b) reduced breast swelling or swelling arms, chest, c) increased my breast size, d) improved breast firmness, e) improved skin elasticity, f) improved my physical health, g) improved my psychological health, h) improved my overall health, and i) improved my overall well-being.

Patients were also asked to complete the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), a ten-question instrument for assessing perceived stress levels.

Patients were also asked to rate their overall pain level, on a scale of 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst pain), both before and after the session.

Patients were also asked to rate their overall quality of life, on a scale of 0 (worst) to 100 (best), both before and after the session.

3. Results

Data from ten female patients were analyzed. The average age was 37.5 years (range: 28 – 57 years). None of the patients were currently pregnant or breast feeding. Six of the patients had received breast massage in the past.

3.1 Reasons for Choosing Breast Massage

Most common reasons for choosing breast massage include: improve overall health (9/10 patients) and overall well-being (8/10 patients), relief muscle tension (8/10 patients), reduce stress (7/10 patients), and increase size/firmness/elasticity (7/10 patients) (Table 1).

Table 1. Reasons for Choosing Breast Massage

Reasons for Choosing Breast Massage	Number of Patients (Percentage of Patients)
Reduce breast pain	3 (30%)
Reduce swelling	1 (10%)
Increase size, firmness, elasticity	7 (70%)
Breast cancer detection	3 (30%)
Relief muscle tension	8 (80%)
Reduce stress	7 (70%)
Improve overall health	9 (90%)
Improve overall well-being	8 (80%)

3.2 Self-Reported Outcomes

Five of the ten patients reported a reduction in breast pain and breast swelling. All ten patients reported an increase in breast size. Almost all reported an increase in breast firmness (9/10 patients), improved skin elasticity (9/10 patients), improved physical health (9/10 patients), improved psychological health (9/10 patients), and improved overall health and well-being (9/10 patients) (Table 2).

Table 2. Self-Reported Benefits of Breast Massage

Self-Reported Outcomes	Number of Patients (Percentage of Patients)				
	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Reduce breast pain	3 (30%)	2 (20%)	5 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Reduce breast swelling	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	5 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Increase breast size	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Improve breast firmness	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Improve skin elasticity	6 (60%)	3 (30%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Improve physical health	4 (40%)	5 (50%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Improve psychological health	4 (40%)	5 (50%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Improve overall health	4 (40%)	4 (40%)	2 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Improve overall well-being	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The average perceived stress level was moderate (average score 19.5), with 4 patients classified as having “Low” stress levels, 5 patients classified as “Moderate” stress levels, and one patient classified as having “High” stress levels.

All patients who reported pain prior to the session, reported a reduction in pain following the session.

An improvement in overall quality of life was reported by 8 of the 10 patients, with an average increase in 18 points.

All ten patients would recommend breast massage to family and friends.

3.3 Bust Size

Bust size increased after the massage session for nine of the patients, with an average increase of 1.2 inches.

4. Discussion

The results of this pilot study show that a majority of patients choose breast massage therapy to improve overall health and overall well-being, as well as relieve muscle tension and reduce stress. Other reasons include increase size/firmness/elasticity, reduce breast swelling and pain, and improve lymphatic drainage.

This study shows several physical and psychological benefits of breast massage therapy among non-cancer patients. Half of patients reported self-perceived reduction in breast pain and breast swelling. Most patients reported a self-perceived increase in breast size, increase in breast firmness, improved skin elasticity, improved physical health, improved psychological health, and improved overall health and well-being.

Breast massage is likely to provide benefits similar to massage therapy by stimulating pressure receptors, which in turn enhance vagal activity and reduce cortisol levels (Wang, 2021). In addition to reduced cortisol levels, increases in levels of serotonin and dopamine, both activating neurotransmitters, have been documented after massage therapy (Van Pelt et al., 2021; Field et al., 2005). This in turn reduces stress and promotes relaxation and improves health and well-being. Reductions in cortisol and heart rate were consistently noted even after single massage therapy sessions (Moraska et al., 2010).

Bust size increased after the massage session for almost all patients. Self-reported increases in bust size have been widely reported following breast massage, and an increasing number of patients are seeking breast massage to increase bust size. This has not been previously studied and the impact of breast massage on bust size remains unclear. Previous research has suggested that massage can be beneficial in combating atrophy and increasing muscle mass; however, this has not been documented in other types of breast tissue specifically (Van Pelt et al., 2021). This may also be a local inflammatory reaction in response to the massage therapy, as massage therapy alters the signaling pathways involved with the inflammatory response (Van Pelt et al., 2021).

There is a lack of studies of breast massage therapy in the general healthy population; however, there are studies among specific populations such as cancer patients and breastfeeding women. The results of this pilot study show similar self-perceived benefits of massage, as documented in other published studies. Massage has been shown to be beneficial among breast cancer patients, including alleviating negative emotion and fatigue among breast cancer patients (Warren et al., 2022; Pan et al., 2014). Breast massage has been shown as an effective treatment in reducing pain among women with breastfeeding problems (Anderson et al., 2019; Abushukur et al., 2022). Breast massage may also have benefits in preventing mastitis after childbirth (Crepinsek et al., 2020).

4.4 Limitations

Although the results of this study are promising and show several self-perceived benefits among non-cancer patients, it is important to note that there are several limitations to this study. Many of these limitations are related to the small sample size, as this study only involved ten participants. Due to resource constraints, including funding, this pilot project included only ten participants to test the feasibility and interest of patients in participating in the study, as well as to provide clarity and direction for a further larger study in the future. Small sample sizes in this qualitative study also allowed for the exploration and understanding of individual participants' experiences, rather than solely relying on data-driven statistics and statistical generalizations. The results of this study are self-reported and qualitative; therefore, they cannot be generalized to the general population, and causal associations should not be made. The data obtained from this study, however, can be used to guide future studies and directions. Furthermore, this study was conducted at a single clinic with a single population in Richmond, British Columbia, Canada. This population may have a different demographic or ethnic composition compared to other populations. As these views and outcomes are self-reported, racial and ethnic variations may influence perspectives and self-reported outcomes. Further studies evaluating a more diverse population, including longitudinal perspectives over time, would be beneficial in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the role of breast massage therapy in the medical setting. Furthermore, studies are required to determine the optimal technique, duration, and frequency of breast massage to yield benefits.

5. Conclusions

Breast massage has positive self-perceived effects on the physical and psychological health and well-being of patients. Its use is increasingly sought after to improve breast health and overall health. Physicians, healthcare providers, and patients should consider breast massage therapy as complementary and alternative medicine, which can be beneficial to patients.

Author Contribution

Ryan Brown contributed to the conception of the study, design of the study, data collection and analysis, writing of the manuscript, and revisions of the manuscript. Marianne Wong contributed to the design of the study, data collection and analysis, writing of the manuscript, and revisions of the manuscript.

Disclosures

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Informed Consent

Obtained.

Provenance and Peer Review

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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