

Asthma Sufferers Benefit from Massage.

By David Hall, Qualified Massage Therapist

It has been known for many years by massage therapists that remedial massage can play an important role in helping to ease the plight of asthma sufferers.

This role may not be well documented, but just ask asthma sufferers who have received massages specially targeting their asthma.

It might be stating the obvious to say asthma is a breathing difficulty.

But what is not quite so obvious is that there are many different groups of muscles involved in the overall breathing process of inhaling and exhaling and assisting the lungs to function.

These muscles make the chest rise and fall, and expand and contract, allowing the lungs to fill and empty of air.

Neck Muscles.

Did you know, for example, that even muscles in the neck help with breathing?

How many times have you had tight neck muscles (for whatever reason)? Could it be even just one such muscle is impinging a nerve which may help trigger asthma?

Remedial massage can release tension in all these breathing muscles and help reduce the incidence of and potential for asthma attacks, as well as bringing significant relief after an attack.

Pressure differentials in the thoracic (rib) area caused by muscles contracting and releasing during breathing also help move lymphatic fluid. The lymphatic system is basically the body's immune system, part of which helps to fight the allergies that may trigger asthma.

Releasing muscle tension subsequently helps improve lymph flow and is another benefit for asthma sufferers (but that's another story!).

Unfortunately, the useful role of remedial massage as a complementary treatment is a fact not often mentioned by those involved in the medical management of asthma, which in Australia is almost a \$1 billion industry. Australia has a reputation as the asthma capital of



the world. Our nation's annual health bill linked to asthma currently nudges the \$1 billion mark.

Asthma affects an estimated two million Australians. One in four Australian children and one in 10 adults are affected by the condition.

Asthma sufferers know only too well the tightness they feel in the chest before and during an asthma attack. After an attack, they often experience muscle soreness and discomfort in the chest, ribcage, shoulders and back.

Rocket Scientist.

You don't need to be a rocket scientist to work out the breathing muscles play a major role in asthma.

If these muscles can be helped to function normally, there is significant potential to reduce the incidence of asthma attacks and relieve muscle pain after an attack - rather than constantly having to take medications.

An important aspect to be considered in asthma treatment is the role the spinal nerves play in activating the breathing muscles and organs like the lungs.

Remedial (deep tissue) massage can help improve spinal nerve function by releasing tension in the spinal muscles and joints and reducing the risk of nerve impingement.

The Chiropractors Association of Australia strongly endorses the concept of helping asthma sufferers by improving lung function by releasing tension in the thoracic spine, as well as in the ribs and muscles used for breathing.

Research Support.

Such treatment is supported by a raft of relevant research, according to a spokesperson for the association.

A recent study published in the Journal of Vertebral Subluxation Research indicates chiropractic care may improve lung function in asthma sufferers, reducing the number and severity of asthma attacks.

Additionally, in the wake of renewed warnings that Australian doctors may be overusing prescribed medications for the prevention of asthma, the research also showed regular chiropractic adjustments reduced sufferers' reliance on drugs. "In studies conducted by the Stress and Spinal Research Unit at Macquarie University, chiropractic care has been identified as a beneficial co-management approach to asthma management," the spokesperson said.

One of the overriding benefits of remedial massage, of course, is it can often reduce or even replace the need for chiropractic adjustments. Again, you don't need to be a rocket scientist to work out it is usually tight and/or weak muscles pulling the spine, ribs and other bones out of alignment in the first place.

When you release tension and balance up the muscles with deep tissue massage (sometimes combined with stretching and exercises) the spine will often correct itself and a lot of other problems just disappear.

Of course, there may be many other factors affecting the spine, but a good deep tissue massage is often all you need and it also can prove surprisingly effective for long term back pain sufferers.

Big Picture.

One of my constant themes in these massage articles is to highlight the importance of looking at the "big picture" in providing effective treatments for any sufferer of muscle or joint pain or problems.

In the case of asthma, it is not good enough to simply try to rectify problems (eg possible nerve impingement) with spinal and associated breathing muscles and organs without also considering the factors that may cause or contribute to those problems in the first place.

One of the major causes of spinal imbalances is lateral tilting of the hips, where the hip on one side sits higher than the other.

Muscle Balance.

Back to the non-rocket science! If you've been through at least the upper grades of primary

school, you will know a little bit about angles. The hips are meant to sit horizontally level and the spine should be at 90 degrees, which means muscles on both sides of the spine should be evenly balanced.

But if the hips are laterally tilted - even slightly, the muscles along the spine cannot possibly be evenly balanced.

There are many possible causes of lateral tilt, but one of the most common is where the hip flexor muscles (across the FRONT of the hips) are tighter and/or weaker on one side than the other.

Another less obvious cause is feet, knee or leg problems which may cause a limp or force the legs and hips to compensate on one side.

In cases where lateral tilt of the hips combined with lateral tilt of the shoulders has become a scoliosis (either an S or C-shaped curve of the spine), this has even more ramifications for asthma sufferers.

For example, when the spine bends into a sideways curve with scoliosis, the vertebrae don't only bend to the side; they also rotate (twist). Because the ribs are connected to the vertebrae, they also distort, giving imbalances between the front, back and sides of the thoracic (rib) cage and may cause more breathing nerve impingement.

So just loosening rib muscles in the back is not enough. Muscles attached to the ribs in front and at the sides also need attention.

Effective Treatment.

Space in this article does not permit me going into more detail. But by now you should have the idea that just working on the obvious areas, like massaging spinal or breathing muscles in the back or manipulating the spine, is only a part of an effective treatment to provide longer lasting relief from asthma.

Competent, qualified remedial masseurs will try to look at the big picture to assist asthma patients. Therapists can't prevent many of the factors triggering asthma - like allergies or weather. But if the many different groups of breathing muscles (both in the front and back of the body) and organs can be helped to more effectively respond to and/or overcome these triggers, many asthma sufferers would breathe a lot easier.

If you'd like more information about remedial massage, call one of our qualified therapists today.