

# BENEFITS OF THERAPEUTIC SPORTS MASSAGE

by Greta Truscott\*

A good therapeutic sports massage can be a great addition to your recovery program and your body's physical health and maintenance.

As a runner and a sports massage therapist, I am well aware of the benefits of massage for runners. Coaches, high profile athletes and sports practitioners often encourage us to get regular massage and in the December issue of R4YL, Benita Johnson outlined a holistic approach to recovery, detailing a good range of methods, massage included. It is important for you to work out which set of recovery methods will be most useful and viable for you, and to make these a regular and effective part of your recovery routine.

## Why do runners need good recovery?

To complete all the sessions on their program effectively, it is essential for runners to maintain adequate physical recovery between sessions and races. It also allows runners to properly prepare for a race. The key to getting the best out of yourself and achieving your running goals is being able to consistently train and race, and this is aided by being able to recover quickly and prevent injury.

## What is sports massage?

Sports massage therapy utilises deep tissue remedial massage techniques which firstly relax and warm the muscles, then unknot and lengthen them. Sports massage also includes joint mobilisations, stretching and strengthening techniques to free up joints, strengthen weak muscles and improve flexibility. Also, sports massage treats and assists in the prevention of specific sports related conditions or injuries, such as tendonitis, muscle strains and sprains, shin splints and plantar fasciitis.

## What causes muscle soreness?

Some of the reasons why you may have specific muscle soreness include micro tears, tightness, adhesions, spasms, lack of nutrients or oxygen, build up of waste products, pain receptor stimulation and nerve irritation. This can cause inefficient muscle function and restricted movement and therefore limit the effectiveness of your training.

## What are some of the benefits of sports massage?

The purpose of sports massage is to enhance

recovery and running performance whereby it:

- Improves circulation and therefore the nutrition and oxygen availability to muscles which are needed for efficient function (as well as to repair 'worn out' or damaged tissues)
- Stimulates the lymphatic and circulatory systems to facilitate the removal of toxins, waste and other metabolic by-products
- Alleviates muscle spasm and nerve irritation
- Breaks down adhesions and scar tissue
- Accelerates recovery caused by fatigue
- Improves the range of motion and shock absorption capabilities of the muscles, which in turn helps you to work more efficiently and reduces the risk of injury
- Stimulates the central nervous system so that the affects reach other areas of the body and provide pain relief
- Provides relaxation and relieves stress, which is important for good recovery. Excess stress and insufficient rest hampers recovery and can make you vulnerable to fatigue, illness or injury. For example, high amounts of stress can cause increased levels of hormones including adrenaline (whereby the sympathetic nervous system or "fight or flight" response is more switched on) and cortisol (also released during stressful situations). High levels of these hormones cause the body to be more stimulated for action rather than recovery. Excess amounts of cortisol can also inhibit the action of the immune system. Therefore it is important to switch on the body for action when required and switch off or rest adequately in between activities.

## Could you benefit from a massage?

More time and investment into your health and recovery can make a world of difference to your running, but it does take extra organisation and planning. Firstly, it is important to find the right massage therapist for you. Ask your coach, club or fellow runners who they recommend or refer to a Massage Association, such as the Association of Massage Therapists Limited, to ensure the therapist is a qualified professional. Secondly, work out the right frequency for you. The frequency of massages will depend on how well you recover, regardless of how much training you do or what level you are at. However, the more speed work, mileage and running on hard surfaces you do the more taxing this will be on your body and therefore the more massage you may need. You could find that you need a massage weekly, fortnightly or monthly if you choose to make massage a regular part of your recovery program. Thirdly, organise your recovery

## Make the most of your massage

- Drink plenty of water following your massage to further aid flushing of toxins (waste products) from the body and to avoid dehydration
- Gentle stretching to further loosen the areas worked on
- A good soak in the bath with Epsom salts
- Plenty of rest
- Keep warm
- Have a healthy snack or meal, to refuel the muscles with nutrients (this also aids in assisting the excretion of waste from the body).

program wisely. Schedule your massages well in advance to avoid putting them off due to busy schedules of either yourself or the therapist.

Finally, if you find that you are having difficulty recovering or avoiding injuries, I would encourage that you look into regular massage. Your massage therapist can also recommend that you consult other health practitioners where required, like a physiotherapist, sports doctor or podiatrist. I personally find that with my weekly running program, which consists of 90km each week (3 speed sessions, 3 interim runs, 1 long run, 2 strength sessions and undertaking constant physical work), I benefit from a regular fortnightly sports massage.

## When is the best time to have a deep tissue sports massage?

Many runners prefer to have a deep tissue massage to work out considerable muscle stiffness and soreness after the daily session has been completed. However, runners do not usually have a deep massage the day before a race as

recovery from breaking down adhesions and soreness can take 24-48 hours following the deep massage. I could safely say not to have a deep massage inside 2-3 days of racing. Having said this, some runners may require deep tissue work for a particular area inside this period. If unsure, discuss this further with your massage therapist.

## What sort of massage do runners tend to have?

Maintenance massage tends to be used most commonly by runners to aid recovery, injury prevention or to address an existing injury. This deep tissue massage often includes the full body (back and shoulder girdle, not only just the gluts and lower limbs). For example, sufficient thoracic spinal rotation is required to counteract pelvic rotation during running gait. If the back and shoulder girdle are tight, this can impede an efficient running style and also limit full breathing. The therapist will always be guided by you as to the areas you think most need addressing and the pressure of the technique you prefer. The maintenance massage tends to be of 1 to 1

½ hours duration.

Pre-event massage can be used right up until before a race and can even be used as an addition to the warm up. The intensity of this type of massage is light to medium, using brisk, flowing type strokes to heat and mobilise the muscles (including hamstrings, calves, quadriceps and back). The pre-event massage tends to be of 20-30 minutes duration or even 5-10 minutes if done in the warm up before a race.

Post-event massage is a fantastic way to recover following a race and can be utilised immediately following the event, or preferably within 24 hours. This type of massage is usually not as deep as the regular maintenance massage, nor as intense as the pre-event massage. However the depth of pressure and type of technique will depend on the level of soreness or condition of the runner. This massage is used to alleviate delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS). You often see this type of massage at the finish line after longer or big events such as City to Surf, Mt Wilson to Bilpin and Ironman races. The post-event massage tends to last 20-30 minutes.

I'm sure you'll find regular sports massage to be a useful addition to your recovery program. With long term application it can have a major impact on your performance and enjoyment of the sport. **R4YL**

## REFERENCES

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