

BRUNCH

WELLNESS

BACK MAGIC

We have all heard that massages work wonders for back pain. But do they really help? We find out for ourselves

by Colleen Braganza and Veenu Singh

MOST OF us have suffered from back pain at least once in our lives. Some of us ignore it, hoping it will go away, others visit doctor after doctor while the third set of victims have discovered that a massage offers them quick relief and swear by massage therapy. But is a massage really good for a bad back?

Yes, says businessman Umesh Mehra, who hurt his spine six months ago and suffers from severe back spasms as a result of that injury. When the spasms strike, Mehra cannot sit, cannot stand, and can only sleep in a particular position.

Mehra made the rounds of orthopaedic surgeons and physiotherapists but soon found that a massage provided the fastest relief from his sometimes-debilitating pain.

Dr Rajeev Thukral, consultant, orthopaedic, Max Healthcare, agrees that a massage can give the kind of relief in two days that medicines do in four, but emphasises that it is certainly not a substitute for long term treatment. "A massage helps because it increases blood supply to the injured area and promotes healing," says Dr Thukral. "However, it just alleviates the symptoms. It doesn't cure the problem."

Dr Thukral reveals back pain can only be prevented with a change of lifestyle. "Eighty per cent of back pain is caused by weak muscles and posture related problems, a result of a sedentary lifestyle. If you eat a well-balanced diet and exercise for at least half an hour a day, back pain is easily avoidable." Till then, massages continue to provide relief. We tested two massages specifically formulated for the lower and upper back to see if they really work.

A MASSAGE JUST ALLEVIATES BACK PAIN, IT DOESN'T CURE THE PROBLEM

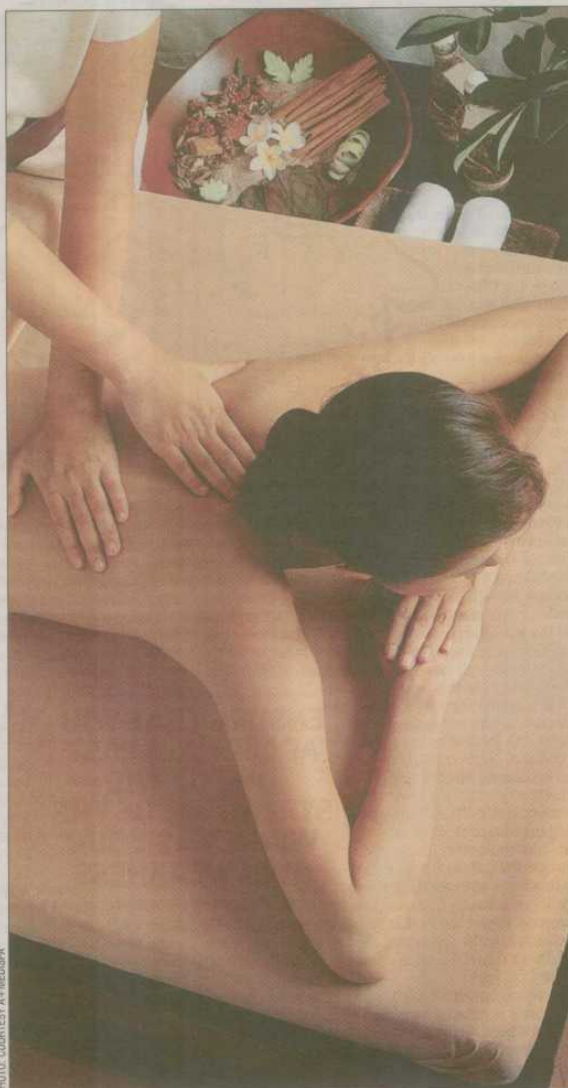


PHOTO: COURTESY A+ MEDSPA

THE UPPER BACK KNOT FACTOR

DR THUKRAL says back pain affects all ages, but in the past five years more and more people in their teens, 20s and 30s are complaining of back pain, probably because of their desk bound lifestyles. I'm one of them.

I cannot remember the last time I didn't have some pain in my upper back (neck and shoulder area). The pain is a constant, only varying in intensity which is why I jumped at chance to 'test' a massage.

Delhi's Asian Roots spa offers what they call a 'blissful back, shoulder and head massage,' that is designed specifically for the upper body. That was ideal for me.

At the spa, my masseuse Yudang explains that this massage combines the best of Swedish and Balinese techniques. The former is gentle but the Balinese technique is more rigorous, involving kneading, rubbing and deep pressure stroking with the tips of the fingers and knuckles to reach deep tissue. Yudang starts with my lower back, rubbing gently and after pressing pressure points along my spine, moves up to my neck and shoulders. She detects knots on my neck and starts working on them, telling me that there are regulars who come to the spa twice or thrice a month because of chronic back pain. "You can really feel their knots. But it doesn't get over in one session. You have to keep coming back for more," she says. She also confirms what Dr Thukral said: "We can't cure your back pain, we just provide relief."

I feel Yudang using her thumbs to work on the knots on my neck. She also uses the tips of her fingers to press pressure points along my shoulders with surprising strength. I feel the tension slipping from my shoulders. But it is when she starts on my head, rubbing my temples vigorously, that I pray the massage would never end.

At the end, I won't say the pain in my neck had completely gone because it will take a few more sessions for that to happen. But when I walked out of Asian Roots, my upper back felt a lot better than it had in days.

cbraganza@hindustantimes.com

The massage had clearly done me a lot of good. Because when I walked out of the spa, my upper back felt a lot better than it had for days

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THE LOWER BACK PAIN RELIEF

I HAVE had pain of varying intensity in my lower back for almost a year now. For relief, I usually resort to a hot water bottle or even pain relief balm at night. That's why I was most enthusiastic when I got a chance to try out a massage for back pain. I was the ideal candidate.

At the A+Medispa (from the house of Amatra), corporate brand manager Anita Kalsi Bhartiya took me to the in-house Ayurvedic doctor who determines each client's body type (*prakriti*) and prescribes oils and herbs for the massage accordingly.

Dr Praveen Nair deduced that my body type was a combination of *kapha* and *vata* and told me I would

I ended the session with steam and a warm bath. That's when I realised that not only had my back pain reduced considerably, I also felt absolutely relaxed and revitalised

be given a combination of three massages. At the massage room, two therapists deftly started with a massage to balance my *chakras*. Done in the classical Kerala style, this massage nourishes, revitalizes the body, enhances body suppleness and induces sleep. The Vedic essence, also called a heat revival massage, followed.

This, I was told, is a rejuvenating treatment in which herbal powders are tied in a muslin cloth, dipped in therapeutic oil and rubbed on the body. It is said to be good for those suffering from joint pain, a stiff back and rheumatoid arthritis. The warm oil was relaxing and as the therapists rubbed and kneaded my back, I felt the pain and stiffness slipping away.

ANYTHING WON'T DO

If you opt for a massage to relieve back pain ensure you choose the right masseuse. The neighbourhood *bai* who doubles up as a masseuse may do if you are looking for a general relaxing massage but not if you have a back injury. Those with back problems need someone knowledgeable about the human body or they risk further pain. That's what happened to businessman Umesh Mehra, who suffers from back spasms because of an old injury. He tried an untrained masseuse someone had referred to him and his pain worsened. "That's when I found a masseuse who is a physiotherapist too. He knows my case history and gives me massages accordingly," says Mehra.



The therapist then concentrated on my lower back with *Kati Vasti*, the third massage. She first applied a herbal paste to my back and then poured hot oil specially suited to my body type on my back. This would relax and cool my lower back, said the therapist. It would also relieve back pain and spinal disorders too.

I ended the session with steam and a warm bath. That's when I realised that my back pain had not only reduced considerably, I was feeling absolutely relaxed and revitalised.

veenus@hindustantimes.com