

# Hands of Healing: Reflexology



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*This forum is a regular contribution from BayView Healthcare to help share the knowledge and expertise of the more than 280 healthcare professionals across our continuum of care and those who support our efforts within the community. In each issue, an area of interest is addressed to help consumers be even more informed about their health and wellness. In this FORUM, Julie Wesling, LMT, shares with us the natural healing art in which comfortable pressure is applied to reflex points in the hands, feet and/or ears that correspond to all the organs, glands and parts of the body. Reflexology is a type of treatment that involves the manipulation of certain pressure points*

*and nerve endings that are located in the feet and hands in order to achieve a specific effect elsewhere in the body.*

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Here's what we know for sure: **reflexology has an effect on our nervous system.** When we receive a reflexology treatment it is very relaxing. And it is when we are in this most relaxed state that our bodies are best able to repair and heal. (It is widely believed that micro-tears in muscle fibers heal while we sleep, for example.) Reflexology is extremely effective at activating our *parasympathetic* nervous system, which is responsible for rest and repair mode (the opposite of a sympathetic state, which is "fight or flight" mode). Karen Ball, Director of the Academy of Ancient Reflexology, writes in one of her manuals *Reflexology*: "This state of deep relaxation allows the body to ... correct the imbalances that are creating unwanted symptoms and conditions. Reflexology creates the internal environment of relaxation that allows for healing to occur."

Another specific way reflexology affects the nervous system is by treating

## Can Reflexology Help You Feel Better?

What if there was a therapeutic discipline that stood the test of time (had been used around the world for about 4500 years), was known to support virtually every condition a person could have, and felt heavenly as it was being administered?



Such a therapy does exist! It's called *reflexology*, and it's a natural healing art in which comfortable pressure is applied to reflex points in the hands, feet and/or ears that correspond to all the organs, glands and parts of the body. By relaxing the nervous system and improving circulation of blood, lymphatic fluid, nerve innervation and energy flow, reflexology can, indeed, help us feel better!

### How Does It Work?

Much research has been done to try to understand how something that happens at the surface, like applying a bit of pressure to the superficial tissue on a specific point, can affect something that happens internally, such as increasing blood circulation in an organ, balancing the secretion of hormones from a gland, improving lymph flow so that we feel less sluggish and our immune system gets a boost.

There's no question that the external and internal workings of our bodies are

linked -at minimum- through blood flow and nerve communication. Similarly, our physical bodies are



linked to our mind and spirit, our physical, emotional and even spiritual health is all intricately entwined. Is it something that can be explained through science? Some intercellular communication via chemical or electromagnetic energy? Or is it a more metaphysical "chi" (qi) or "life energy" that is affected by touch outside of the "nervous system" that we can measure?

an "overgrowth" of nerve tissue in the feet (or hands). In *Reflexology*, Karen Ball also writes "An increase in nervous tissue develops in the foot or hand in response to, and as an indicator of, an unhealthy organ. Specific reflexology techniques 'untangle' the excess congestion and break the biomechanical link between the nerve fibers making it possible for the nerves to transmit impulses freely again."

New discoveries are being made all the time. Recent research shows that some women suffering with **fibromyalgia** have an overgrowth of blood vessels in the palms of their hands. While it is not known why this occurs, it may help explain why reflexology is so beneficial to support conditions like fibromyalgia—by improving blood flow and clearing any congestion or stagnation or inflammation in the hands.

Another recent discovery is that the nervous system—specifically one of our cranial nerves called the vagus nerve—is a contributing factor in autoimmune disorders such as **rheumatoid arthritis**. The vagus nerve is one of the main regulators of the parasympathetic nervous system, helping us return to calm after stress. When the vagus nerve is not doing regulating well, the person stays in a too-heightened state of stress almost all the time. This causes havoc with the immune system, sometimes resulting in autoimmune disorders. Doctors are having success with implanting a device that sends electrical impulses to the vagus nerve to stimulate it and make it more effective. Therapies like reflexology help the body shift into the parasympathetic state naturally!

At a minimum, we know that reflexology:

- is **relaxing**—by reducing tension it helps us overcome the ill effects of stress and can improve our feelings of wellbeing
- increases **lymph** flow which is good for our immune system and can reduce swelling
- increases **blood flow** which is good for healing—improved circulation of blood brings nutrients to cells and removes metabolic waste, which in turn...
- **promotes normal functioning of the body's organs and glands**, and
- helps to **maintain optimum health**

#### Why would someone choose reflexology as a treatment?

1. It is **calming**. Foot reflexology feels really good and it helps people relax. It's an especially good choice for someone who has difficulty winding down, someone with anxiety or insomnia, or related disorders like tension headaches or digestive disorders.

2. It **treats body systems** not just specific tissues. Massage therapy endeavors to release tension in muscles and soft tissues—it works on our musculoskeletal structures. Reflexology works on our internal operating systems, such as the endocrine, respiratory and digestive systems. Although reflexology is good for the hands and feet themselves (and lots of people choose it because they have specific pain or issues in their hands or feet like arthritis of the hands or plantar fasciitis), the end goal can include helping the whole body function better—every gland, organ and body part.

3. It's **less invasive**. This amazing therapy can treat the whole body just by touching the feet or hands or ears. This makes it a great choice for anyone who is uncomfortable with massage. The recipient does not have to get undressed. The recipient does not have to be able to lie on a massage table for an hour. It can be performed very gently and still be effective. It is a great choice for anyone who can't tolerate a lot of pressure, including the elderly and medically fragile.

#### What conditions can reflexology help?

Virtually any condition can be supported and sometimes improved by helping the nervous system relax deeply. When we are truly relaxed, we can breathe more fully, digest food better, recover from stress and heal. Some conditions that respond well to reflexology include:

- **anxiety** and related disorders such as **insomnia**
- digestive issues such as **constipation** and **irritable bowel syndrome**
- women's health issues such as **menstrual symptoms** and **menopause**
- chronic painful conditions such as headaches, **migraines** and **sciatica**
- autoimmune diseases like **fibromyalgia** and **rheumatoid arthritis**
- **sinus congestion** or **infection**
- and so much more

#### How seniors can benefit from reflexology

Reflexology doesn't have to hurt to be effective. The pressure applied can be so gentle that even a medically fragile person can safely receive reflexology.

A person doesn't have to be particularly



**Julie Wesling, LMT**

agile to receive reflexology—you don't have to disrobe or roll over half way through treatment as in massage therapy.

Reflexology is helpful for conditions like **arthritis**. If a person had arthritis in their hands, for example, as long as they aren't having an acute flare-up, it usually feels very good to have the hands worked on. In the case of a flare-up, reflexology to the feet can help. And some people feel like reflexology helps keep them more mobile and flexible!

Who wouldn't want to feel healthier and

calmer and stay more active? Reflexology can improve our feelings of wellbeing at all stages of life.

I had the great privilege of working on a Hospice patient at Bayview Healthcare's Samantha Wilson Care Center in the final stages of her life. She was no longer able to be transported to an office to receive therapy; getting undressed and transfer to a table for treatment like massage therapy was out of the question for her. As she was confined more and more to her bed and wheelchair, she suffered from chronic back pain. But she looked forward to my visits, and she responded very well to hand and foot reflexology! In addition to enjoying it—because it does feel wonderful—she seemed to eat a little more easily and sleep more sound with better quality of lifestyle. I've seen exciting results in my own practice, and I encourage you to try reflexology for yourself and enjoy the benefits of this amazing application of healing touch! *WJ*



## Health & Wellness Forum

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