

Tune Up Your Body With Sports Massage Therapy

By Melissa Eisler
Active.com

You are vigilant about your training and meticulous in your diet and fueling practices. Why then, are you not committed to receiving the bodywork that should be a regular element of your training?

"It's amazing how many athletes don't even think about getting bodywork, especially when they are in season," said Mary Owen, massage therapist with a concentration in sports therapy and myofascial release. "Regular maintenance is always recommended to athletes that are consistently overworking the same muscle groups. But during those tough parts of the year, when athletes are racing, competing and doing their most rigorous training, that's when it's most important."

"I like to compare our bodies to our cars. You have to get regular maintenance on your car. Without proper attention, they break down. Before preparing for a road trip, you take your car in to balance and check the tires, tune it up, and see if it's safe for the road. You should apply the same precautions to your body. Before anything, be it a marathon, a century ride or even surfing...warming up the body, stretching it and getting massaged to make sure your body is prepared for what's ahead is beneficial and will help in the long run (no pun intended)," Owen said with a laugh.

The Best Time for a Massage

Athletes are often confused about the best time to get body work. Right before a race? A week before the big event? A few hours after you cross the finish line? Or should you wait a few days?

"Ideally, athletes should get a tough, deep tissue massage three days to a week before a race or big event," Owen said. "And another massage the day before or morning of the race—but this one should be focused on stretching and isometric approaches, which concentrate on breathing and relaxing while the therapist massages and stretches you,"

"Right after a race is a great time to get a massage," she continued. "But you must make sure it's not vigorous. It should be more of a relaxing massage to calm your tight muscles. If you are in pain, make sure to ice your muscles for a few days and stretch. After three or four days of ice, if nothing is injured, this is the perfect time for a deep tissue massage and myofascial release."

Benefits of Massage

The terms deep tissue and myofascial release are often used together. Many think they are synonymous, but there are differences in these types of massage. Both techniques are very beneficial to athletes.

Deep tissue massage: The therapist works deep into the actual muscles, trigger points and tender points.

Myofascial release: The massage goes even deeper, concentrating on the fascia, fibers and connective tissue of the muscles, instead of the actual muscles.

With any massage—even a relaxing Swedish massage—there’s still the benefit of blood and oxygen running through the body, breaking up adhesions in the body and flushing out toxins. But deep tissue, myofascial release, sports massage, Thai massage and chiropractic work are recommended for athletes to ensure muscles are getting proper attention, and spine and hips are aligned and adjusted properly.

If you are in active training, such as training for a marathon, triathlon or century ride, a massage twice a month is recommended, if money and time allow.

Common Problems in Athletes

Often athletes can’t identify the specific problems they are having, they just know they are experiencing pain. “Many athletes will come in complaining of aches and pains, stemming from their lower backs, but they don’t realize what it is,” Owen explained. “The majority of times, it’s a sciatic nerve problem. A lot of people don’t know the term, but they can identify the feeling and pain. I usually know right away according to what kind of sport they’re involved with and their complaint.”

Runners

Runners tend to have a lot of shin splints and sciatic nerve problems. “When working on runners, I usually focus on the legs, shins, thighs and hamstrings,” Owen said. “I always tell them that if they aren’t careful and their hips aren’t balanced and aligned properly, it can dramatically change performance and alignment of your body. You could seriously injure yourself. It’s important to stretch first and get aligned regularly. Wearing comfortable shoes helps too.”

Cyclists

“Cyclists are really tough to work on. Their muscles are generally tighter than most athletes,” explained Owen. “And they have to be really comfortable to get a massage because their groin muscles and the inside of their thighs are what need the most work. I make sure to employ proper draping and talk them through it so they are prepared and comfortable.” Draping is a technique where therapists cover the entire body with a sheet and expose only the part being massaged.

Triathletes

Triathletes will often have many of the common alignment and muscle issues runners and cyclists have. “If I had only an hour to spend on a triathlete, I would start with their legs, get deeper work into their glutes and hips, and work on their mid-back area.”

Swimmers

“Swimmers generally tend to have the least amount of pain out of the athletes I work on,” Owen said. “But I always focus on their upper bodies—rotator cuffs, traps and neck muscles—since that is the most-overused part of a swimmer’s body.”

Do-it-yourself Bodywork Muscle Aids

Here are some do-it-yourself techniques to soothe overworked muscles and relieve muscle pain:

- **Tennis Balls:** Lay on the floor with a tennis ball—lay on top of it where your tender point is and roll around on the muscle for a few minutes, breathing deeply. You should feel a release.
- **Muscle stick or rolling pin:** Have someone roll it on your muscle for release.
- **Stretching**
- **Ice**
- **Biofreeze:** Good for acute injuries; prevents them from getting worse.
- **Tiger Balm:** Best for chronic and long-term injury and pain. The eucalyptus settles the muscles and produces a long-lasting effect.

“The body is an interesting thing, but unlike our cars, we’re stuck with them for the rest of our lives,” said Owen. “Why not take care of it now, so instead of being stuck in a wheelchair watching your grandson play basketball—you can be on his team playing with him.”