

Self-massage

BY CHARLES HOWE

Prolonged and/or intense exercise causes microscopic tearing of muscle fibers, and as a result, fluid accumulates within the muscle fibers, bringing swelling and pain. Massage helps to directly flush out these waste products while stimulating blood (nutrients/oxygen) and lymph circulation, thus relieving symptoms of fatigue and expediting recuperation, while improving suppleness and flexibility. Although massage may also be used prior to exercise, discussion here is limited solely to post-workout application.

Therapeutic massage was used in China as long ago as 3000 BCE, while ancient Greek and Roman physicians massaged athletes both before and after competition. Disused and discredited during the Middle Ages, it was revived in Sweden in the early 1800s by Per Henrik Ling, a fencing master and gymnast, who developed a set of rules that formed the basis of what came to be known as “Swedish massage.” From there, massage has been studied and refined, gaining steadily-widening acceptance as a legitimate form of physical therapy.

To get the most benefit from a massage session, visit a professional therapist in your area, but if you are unable or unwilling to do so, you can perform massage on yourself. As an aid to recuperation, massage is best performed within 48 hours of working out (any longer than that, and your muscles will have recovered naturally), and after a light meal or snack, which helps to draw blood from the extremities. Legs should be clean and closely-shaved before starting, and a lubricant should always be used; commercially-prepared massage oil is available at most any bath furnishings or health food store, but can be custom-mixed to suit (for recipes, see <http://www.pioneerthinking.com/massage.html>). Even plain baby oil will do in a pinch. If possible, lie on your back, with your legs elevated (perhaps propped up against the wall), which allows muscles to relax and lets gravity aid in removing fluids from them. Begin by applying the lubricant, and when it has been evenly distributed over both legs, start massaging at mid-thigh, using light, superficial, slow strokes primarily with the full hand, *always from distal to proximal, i.e., toward the heart*, occasionally shaking the muscle group and kneading it gently between your hands. The goal of this “full muscle flush” is to loosen up the muscles, open up blood vessels, and stimulate circulation in the upper portion of the quadriceps, so that fluid from the lower part can be flushed out next. Continue down to the lower area of the front thigh, then move on to the calf region, using the same technique. After a while, move on to circular strokes concentrated on areas that seem stiff or knotted, then finish up the calf and the thigh with long, deeper strokes, applying slightly more pressure with the finger and thumb tips, and always toward the heart. About six minutes is enough for the thigh, four for the calf, and another three to finish up both.

This is usually enough, but for deeper relief, move on to a broad cross-fiber stroke with the full hand, starting at the middle of the thigh, working sideways (laterally and medially), and applying more pressure than previously. This helps to separate the muscle fibers and make them more pliable for the next stroke, deep muscle *spress*, a Swedish term for muscle stripping, where fingers and the palm of the hand penetrate the muscle deeply. Apply heavy pressure, past the point of discomfort *but not pain*. Concentrate on specific areas, rather than an entire muscle group, such as the belly of the calf muscle, the outside of the quadriceps, and the buttocks, all of which are heavily recruited in the pedal stroke, and are therefore subjected to more stress. Such “deep tissue” massage should be followed by 24-36 hours recovery, and may best be left to a certified professional.



After the doing the other leg, lie and relax for 10 minutes or so, then cleanse both legs thoroughly using rubbing alcohol and a washcloth, followed by soap and warm water.

Special thanks to massage therapist [Gail Longenecker](#) of [Your Health Matters](#) for her review of this article. A graduate of the London College of Massage and former member of the RONA women's professional cycling team, Longenecker is based in Longmont, Colorado, and may be reached at (303) 774-9155.

FOR FURTHER READING

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Strickland, B. Kneading you. *Bicycling* 33(6):76-77, 1992.

Robertson, A., J.M. Watt, and S.D. Galloway. Effects of leg massage on recovery from high intensity cycling exercise. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* [38\(2\):173-6](#), April 2004.

<http://www.massagetherapy101.com>

<http://spas.about.com/od/swedishmassage/a/Swedish.htm>

SELECTED MASSAGE THERAPISTS IN NORTHEAST OHIO

Westside Massage Clinic
4876 Dover Center Road
North Olmsted, Ohio 44070
(440) 777-4547

Perfect Touch Massage
1100 West Bagley Road
Berea, Ohio 44017
(440) 891-HEAL (4325)

Westlake Massotherapy Clinic
26843 Detroit Road
Westlake, Ohio 44145
(440) 892-1225

River Therapeutic Massage
20525 Detroit Road
Rocky River, Ohio 44116
(440) 333-5564

ON-LINE LOCATER RESOURCES

Associated Bodywork and Massage Professionals – <http://www.abmp.com>

American Massage Therapy Association – <http://www.amtamassage.org>

<http://www.masseusefinder.com>

<http://www.messageangels.com>

<http://www.iwantamassage.com>