

Your body on... **a massage**

Ahhhh – it feels so good. Here's why:

By *Laura Beil*

One touch. That's all it takes. As soon as your skin's nerve cells sense pressure, they shoot a split-second "chill out" signal to the brain. One study in the *International Journal of Neuroscience* found massage activates your parasympathetic nervous system. Long name, simple purpose: it combats stress by hitting a reset button for your...

Lungs and belly

The vagus nerve, the main parasympathetic highway between your brain and major organs, sends a message to your lungs to breathe more slowly and deeply. "Relaxation massage results in a chemical release that stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system," says Narelle James, Vice President of the Australian Association of Massage Therapists. "It restores the body to a resting state and that response includes slowed breathing." She adds that abdominal massage releases tension, "which improves digestion and absorption."

Heart

During a back, neck or chest massage, your heart rate can slow by more than 10 beats per minute, and a study from the Louisiana State University in the US found that after a 45- to 60-minute rub down, systolic blood pressure (when your heart is beating regularly) dropped an average of 10 points, while diastolic blood pressure (when your heart is relaxed) dropped five points.

Immune system

Stimulated by the soothing pressure of kneading, your infection-fighting white blood cells amp up their activity. In particular, natural "killer cells"

go on vigilant patrol, hunting down and helping to eliminate viral, bacterial and cancerous cells. A study in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* found Swedish massage can help increase the number of lymphocytes – white blood cells in your immune system.

Glands

Those hands running over your body do wonders for your anxiety: the vagus nerve instructs the adrenal glands to cut back the release of stress hormones. "It decreases cortisol levels," says James.

Brain

Your brainwaves start to change, moving further into their current state. So if it's morning and you're wide awake, you may feel more alert after a massage. "Massage increases

circulation and oxygen to your cells, which raises your energy levels," says James. But if you have an evening treatment, your brainwaves may shift into a sleep pattern, leading to solid shut-eye that night. Provoked by parasympathetic nerves, your brain can step up production of the good-mood neurotransmitter serotonin.

Aches and pains

You may be able to skip the painkillers, as massage can trigger powerful natural relief. On the way to your brain, those pressure signals from your skin's nerve cells go through the spinal cord, one of your body's pain centres. And pressure signals travel faster than pain signals, temporarily blocking any ouches. "Massage works by closing the gate that pain impulses have to pass through," says James. Ahhh. **wh**

YOU SHOULD KNOW

The most effective pressure: on a scale of 1-10 (10 being painful) opt for a seven



GIVE AS GOOD AS YOU GET

Try the "raking" method on your partner Spread your fingers and, using your fingertips, start at the shoulder area then slide them down his back as you would rake a garden. He'll be putty in your hands.