

SPINE & SPORTS: What is soft tissue therapy?

Tuesday

Posted Dec 13, 2016 at 9:09 AM

Updated Dec 15, 2016 at 10:01 AM

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Much of the human body is composed of soft tissue, namely anything that is not hard bone. Soft tissue therapy involves various hands-on and instrument-assisted procedures that affect one component of our soft tissues: fascia.

Therapies known as myotherapy, myofascial, trigger point, deep tissue and myofascial release are styles or brands, each with the purpose of modifying or alleviating fascia in some way.

Fascia is the connective tissue that weaves its way through the entire body, comprising about 30 percent of total body weight. Every membrane on every part of the body, from the periosteum which lines our bones, to the coverings of our nerves and sinewy tendons, to the glistening sheath surrounding all of our muscles, is made of fascia. Fascia, akin to the fibers that hold skin against meat, was once thought of as an inert connective tissue. In reality, it is a living elastic support system, with a texture and tone that can vary from taut to gelatinous, playing a supportive role like guy wires that hold up a bridge, or a functional one lubricating body parts which rub against one another, or a neurologic role, as nerves connect, not to muscles or organs, but to the fascial membranes which envelop them. Adhered or disrupted fascia entraps nerves, and thus bungles the brain's connection to the body. It is no wonder that soft tissue therapy can greatly alleviate pain and bodily impairment.

Soft tissue therapies are utilized by different health-care providers. Massage therapists and chiropractors do the bulk of it, as do some physical therapists and athletic trainers. Rubbing, kneading, stretching or in some way un-snagging or

debriding fascia, either by hand or with an instrument, is often the goal. What separates the amateurs from the professionals is the level of training in soft tissue therapy, the depth of understanding of how fascia behaves, and the extent of time practicing these methods with regularity. It's easy to get "rubbed the wrong way!"

Visualize a therapist working on a client's shoulder, but using a metal instrument instead of their hands. This is instrument-assisted soft tissue mobilization, and one common brand is Graston Technique. Now imagine the same patient also exercising their shoulder by pulling resistance bands while simultaneously receiving IASTM. This brand of soft tissue therapy is known as functional and kinetic treatment with rehab, FAKTR. Other methods that involve the patient moving include the pin-and-stretch technique, whereby the provider presses and "pins" down a muscle and the patient stretches away from it. Active myofascial release methods involve the patient twisting or stretching in some way while the provider attempts to "release" the fascia surrounding a muscle. In addition to these, there are tried and true methods that are decades old, including transverse friction massage and Rolfing, as well as recently trending techniques such as cupping, originally conceived in Chinese medicine.

Obtaining high-quality soft tissue therapy is always a challenge, but it is worth doing a little research to find the right provider who can competently perform a variety of soft tissue procedures. Mixing different therapies or adding them in tandem with other forms of care can greatly enhance outcomes in the treatment of musculoskeletal disorders.

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