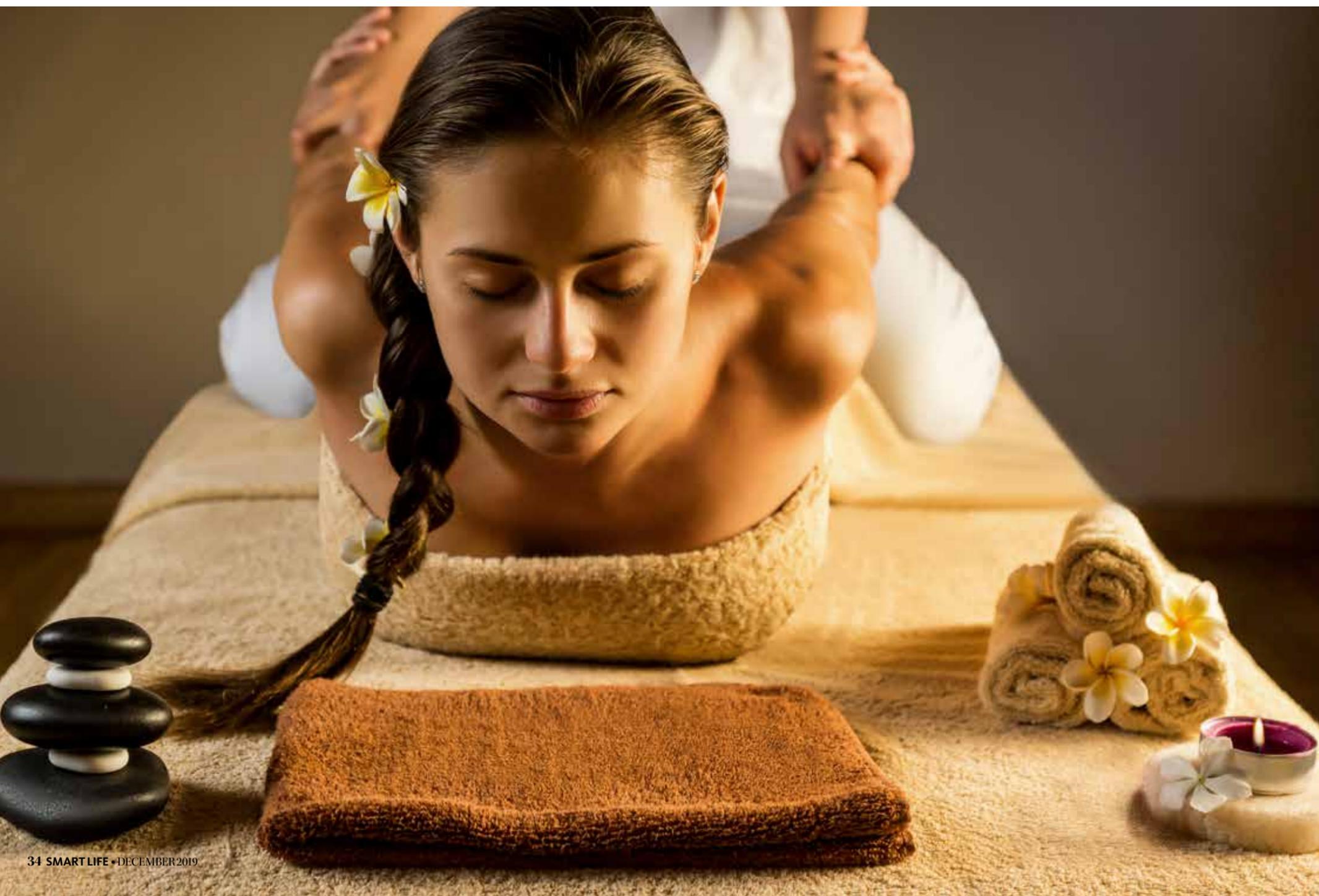


# Healing touch

Once considered an alternative or fringe approach, massages are now more mainstream with clinics, spas and even airports offering it

BY NIVEDITA JAYARAM PAWAR



**M**assage is a general term for pressing, rubbing and manipulating your skin, muscles, tendons and ligaments. A massage may range from light stroking to deep pressure. But not all massages are the same. While some massages like the Swedish massage is all about gentle pressure and long strokes that help you relax, a deep tissue massage uses more-forceful strokes to target the deeper layers of muscle and connective tissues to help with muscle damage from injuries. A sports massage aids treatment of injuries and the trigger point massage focuses on areas of tight muscle post injury or stress. Today, massage therapy is offered in companies, clinics, hospitals and even airports—massage therapy is now considered a mainstream treatment option.

“Massage is perhaps one of the oldest healing traditions. Many ancient cultures including the Ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Chinese and Indians were convinced of the therapeutic properties of massage and used it to treat a variety of ailments,” says Dr Arun Pillai, wellness director, Dharana at Shillim, a holistic wellness retreat in Maharashtra.

## The calming benefits of massage

One of the immediate benefits of massage is a feeling of deep relaxation. This happens because massage prompts the release of endorphins—the neurotransmitters that trigger the feeling of well-being. “When the body is under stress, it results in unhealthy levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, which can contribute to weight gain, sleeplessness, digestive problems and headaches. Massage therapy has been shown to decrease cortisol levels in the body. This enables the body to enter recovery mode,” says Ambika Chetri, spa and recreation manager, The Westin Pushkar Resort and Spa.

And you are not the only one who craves a soothing body rub every now and then. Babies also find a gentle

laying on of hands very relaxing and even therapeutic. “Of the five senses, touch is the one that is most developed at birth and research says that infant massage has enormous benefits for helping babies grow healthy,” says Chetri. It can also help ease the baby’s tummy troubles and teething pains, boost muscle development and aids in providing good sleep. Most importantly, all that stroking and touching make it easier for mothers to bond with their newborns.

“The purpose of massage therapy is to target the source of the body’s pain by eliminating tense muscles, increasing flexibility and providing relaxation to the affected muscles as well as the body as a whole. Some massages such as aroma massage are purely for relaxation. But massages such as the Tibetan Kunye massage and the Ayurvedic Abhayanga massage bring about a lot of physiological benefits by promoting blood circulation to the affected or injured muscles—it increases the oxygen supply to the damaged tissues. The increased activity to the affected sites reduces stiffness and edema (swelling) in the muscles and joints, as well as increases flexibility to help reduce pain. A massage also boosts the dopamine and serotonin levels in the body. These hormones assist the body in healing, pain management and to generally calm the nerves,” says Dr Pillai.

Furthermore, the squeezing, twisting and pulling action of the massage technique also removes lactic acid from the muscle tissues. This action improves the lymph fluid circulation, which aids in eliminating metabolic waste products away from internal organs and muscles. In turn, this results in lower blood pressure levels and improves overall body function. “Massage therapy can provide relief in conditions like neck pain, lower back pain, knee osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia (widespread muscle and joint pain) and sports injuries. By promoting relaxation, it can also help reduce stress levels. There is some evidence to



suggest that it may be helpful in alleviating anxiety and depression. It can also help improve blood circulation,” says Dr Siddharth M. Shah, consultant orthopaedic and joint replacement surgeon, S.L. Raheja Hospital.

### The frequency

How often you should get a massage depends on several factors, including your physical and emotional needs, stress levels and your budget. If you get a massage once a year, it will be relaxing, but it can't undo a lifetime of muscle tension. “If you do not suffer from any health condition and are going mainly for its relaxing effects, then once in two to four weeks is fine. If you are suffering from a health condition, your doctor can guide you about how frequently you should visit a massage therapist,” says Dr Shah. Typically, once every week or two is ideal for keeping your muscle tissue pliable and in good shape. Once you're feeling good, once a month is the recommended minimum for maintaining the health of your tissue.

### Stay calm and go for a massage

- \* Be as receptive and open to the massage process as possible.
  - \* Don't eat just before a massage session. Let your body digest your meal first.
  - \* Be on time. If you arrive in a frenzied, rushed state, it may take longer to relax.
  - \* Take off only as much clothing as you are comfortable removing. If you don't want to remove your clothing, wear clothing that will be comfortable during the massage and will allow the massage therapist to touch and move the areas of your body you expect will need to be massaged.
  - \* Remember to breathe normally. Breathing helps facilitate relaxation.
- People often stop or limit their breathing when they feel anxious or a sensitive area is massaged.
- \* It's normal to feel a little sore the day after many types of massage. But it should never be painful or uncomfortable.
  - \* If a massage therapist is pushing too hard, ask for lighter pressure.
  - \* Occasionally you may have a sensitive spot in a muscle that feels like a knot. It's likely to be uncomfortable while your massage therapist works it out. But if it becomes painful, speak up.
  - \* Your massage therapist may use oil to reduce friction on your skin. Inform your therapist if you are allergic to any ingredients.

### Not for you

Massage is not a good idea if you have a fever, infections or inflammation. “Avoid massage therapy if you bleed easily or are taking medicines which thin your blood or delay blood

clotting. People with osteoporosis or weak bones should also refrain from indulging in a massage as also those who suffer from blood clots, have open wounds or generalised skin conditions,” explains Dr Shah. □