

Does therapeutic touch reduce pain?: overview



Abstract

Pain has a significant negative impact on those who experience it and is not always eased by analgesia. Complementary therapies such as Therapeutic Touch may provide an alternative solution for pain relief. While there have not been many studies into Therapeutic Touch, there is some evidence that it may reduce pain. Recent review articles that assessed Therapeutic Touch as a form of pain relief are discussed here.

Pain is a common symptom, which is estimated to affect nearly one in five adults in Europe (Fricker, 2003). There are many causes of pain, which can be acute such as following an injury or chronic as is the case in arthritis. Pain not only is a physical symptom, but can affect people's psychological well being and can have a negative impact on quality of life, not to mention the economic consequences due to lost working days (Ventegodt & Merrick, 2005). However, even though the original source may appear to have resolved, pain can linger and does not always respond to conventional medical treatments (Ventegodt & Merrick, 2005). For these reasons it is important to explore other therapies as a means of providing pain relief. One such therapy is Therapeutic Touch.

Therapeutic Touch is where a therapist consciously uses their hands over a patient's skin to help balance their energy fields (Rosa et al., 1998). It is based on the theory that there is a two-way flow of energy between any person and their environment and for good health the flows need to be in equilibrium. Tense feelings that can develop from a person's emotional state can cause tension to build up in muscles, bones, joints and connective tissue, which can act as a blockage to the flow of energy and manifest itself as pain

(Ventegodt & Merrick, 2005). Therapeutic Touch aims to provide a cure, not through working on individual tissues in the body, but through the person as a whole, enhancing their overall wellbeing (Ventegodt & Merrick, 2005).

While some hospitals in North America are already using Therapeutic Touch as part of their treatment programmes (So et al., 2008), the use of this complementary approach has not been widely studied. Embracing the concept of evidence based medicine, where therapies need to have demonstrated that they do indeed provide benefit and do not result in any harm, it is important that the effectiveness and safety of Therapeutic Touch is assessed.

A Cochrane Review in 2008 assessed 16 studies (either randomised controlled trials or clinical controlled trials) of Therapeutic Touch in relation to pain relief. It found that although a positive result was not seen in all studies, when considered as a whole there was a significant reduction in pain through this therapy, with one study highlighting that Therapeutic Touch may reduce the need for a patient to take analgesia (So et al., 2008).

However, this review did highlight the need for further high quality studies in this area, particularly those involving children, as these were not well represented. It also emphasised that although Therapeutic Touch appears a safe therapy, it is still important that studies document any adverse effects.

Similar findings to the Cochrane Review were described by a literature review published in the Journal of Holistic Nursing (Monroe, 2009). While only five studies were deemed rigorous enough to be included, the results from four of them showed a significant positive impact of Therapeutic Touch on pain relief, particularly in the management of pain in

osteoarthritis, musculoskeletal pain and burns. However, again, further

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studies were recommended as necessary, including inclusion of a wider range of participants and investigating the effects of treatment frequency, duration and benefit for different types of pain. Little is known about the true mode of action of Therapeutic Touch, so this is another important avenue for further study. Despite not fully consistent results and calls for continued research, interestingly the author recommends that Therapeutic Touch currently be offered as a mode of pain relief, as it is considered to be a safe treatment.

Some studies of Therapeutic Touch and pain relief have also explored its benefit on emotional aspects such as depression and anxiety (Lin & Taylor, 1998; Marta et al., 2010; McCormack, 2009). While the results of studies have been mixed, some have shown a significant positive impact (Lin & Taylor, 1998; Marta et al., 2010), which might be evidence to link the mechanism of Therapeutic Touch for pain relief to its ability to improve emotional wellbeing. A Cochrane Review from 2009 investigating the benefit of Therapeutic Touch on anxiety was not able to conclude anything, as there have not been any well-designed studies for inclusion in an analysis, indicating the need for high quality research in this area (Robinson et al., 2007).

One area of Therapeutic Touch studies that has come under criticism is the placebo controls used (Rosa et al., 1998). Unusually the emphasis in Therapeutic Touch is that its efficacy is reliant on the intent of the therapist, so the argument is that the result is less likely to be influenced by the belief of the participant. So traditional placebo controls where the subject is not aware whether or not they are receiving the actual treatment would be inadequate without also the provision of treatment by a sham touch

practitioner - they imitate the treatment provided by the true touch

therapists but do not alter their state of consciousness (So et al., 2008).

While studies which have indicated positive results in relation to pain relief have often been with elderly participants (Lin & Taylor, 1998; Marta et al., 2010; McCormack, 2009), this may bring into question whether the benefits may be seen across other age groups. However, as we now live in a time where the demographics are changing towards an ageing population, with people living longer the incidence of chronic disease increases and with many of these pain can be a factor; finding a treatment which may benefit older adults is particularly important (Marta et al., 2010).

So in answer to the question posed, there is some indication that

Therapeutic Touch aids pain relief, at least in certain patient groups.

However, further research will be required before firm conclusions can be drawn and before Therapeutic Touch becomes a mainstream therapy.

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