

Therapist: Mary Antonia Creamer, BA, LMT
Certified Hand & Foot Reflexologist
(Graduate of the Academy of Ancient Reflexology)
toni.creamer@yahoo.com

Reflexology's Effect on Fibromyalgia

Introduction:

Fibromyalgia syndrome is a common and chronic disorder characterized by widespread pain, diffuse tenderness, and a number of other symptoms. The word "fibromyalgia" comes from the Latin term for fibrous tissue (*fibro*) and the Greek ones for muscle (*myo*) and pain (*algia*).

Although fibromyalgia is often considered an arthritis-related condition, it is not truly a form of arthritis (a disease of the joints) because it does not cause inflammation or damage to the joints, muscles, or other tissues. Like arthritis, however, fibromyalgia can cause significant pain and fatigue, and it can interfere with a person's ability to carry on daily activities. Also like arthritis, fibromyalgia is considered a rheumatic condition, a medical condition that impairs the joints and/or soft tissues and causes chronic pain. [1]

Previous Literature

Prior research on this topic is scarce. One study was cited on multiple sites. To paraphrase the conclusions: In a research study on reflexology and fibromyalgia from Iceland, six women in ages between 27 and 55 with fibromyalgia were given 10 weekly reflexology treatments, and were asked to fill in daily symptom diaries for 13 weeks, starting before and ending after the reflexology sessions. Four of the six women noticed dramatic changes after six to eight treatments. Five women found they felt less tired and could cope better with work and responsibility.

Researchers concluded that Reflexology can benefit people living with fibromyalgia, with no side-effects. The researchers noted that symptoms might become worse before getting better. [2], [3]

Another researcher concluded: "As the reflexology sessions continued over this five-week period, the symptoms she entered the study with have all decreased. Her sleep has improved and her ADLs have had a profound positive impact." (sic) [4]

Objective:

To learn if, and in what ways, receiving reflexology might improve the quality of life for a person diagnosed with Fibromyalgia.

Subject:

My Subject is a 66 year-old woman who is a visual artist; a hairstylist (for several decades); a wife, and the mother of two daughters. She works four full days per week cutting hair. She is left-handed, but has always used regular (right-handed) scissors. Requested I not touch her hands during the study. She was diagnosed "maybe 15 years

ago,” approximately 2001, with Fibromyalgia Syndrome (FMS). She suspects she may have had it longer. My Subject also has Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) with which FMS is often associated. Effects of FMS pervade her day-to-day life. She experiences sudden sharp pains, which sometimes awaken her from sleep, and she generally has trouble sleeping through the night. She feels tingling, numbness, especially in her feet and dull aches everywhere. Subject stated of FMS, “it’s exhausting.” She finds taking a hot bath eases her symptoms. She takes Advil on a regular basis. Subject tries to avoid taking prescribed medicines because of their side effects. Of her career, Subject states, “Work is a fabulous distraction from the pain.” She has tried exercise, “which didn’t seem to help at all” to relieve discomfort. Her symptoms are exacerbated by “stressful times, especially Holiday Season.” She says during this time she tries to just “power through.” She had not tried Reflexology for relief from FMS prior to this study.

The Study - Treatment Plan:

This study consisted of weekly one-hour reflexology sessions at 11:00am on 6 consecutive Mondays. (One of the treatments was moved to Wednesday, at 11:00am to accommodate the Subject, who had a previous appointment.) Each foot received for 30 minutes. No other modality was used. All reflexes were addressed in the protocol. I used relaxation techniques, thumb- and finger-walking, and hook-and-backup techniques on the feet, and worked the following reflexes three times each: Musculoskeletal, Endocrine System, Central Nervous System, and Lymphatic system. The thinking for working the Lymphatic system is based on the association noted on the NIH.gov information, cited above; and also, a characteristic warmth and tautness to the skin and tissue I have noticed when giving massage to clients with FMS.

My Subject answered a standard questionnaire prior to the first session, and kept a daily journal for the duration of the study. Questions in the journal were based upon her symptoms, and included a daily record of the pattern of her discomfort.

Results:

Subject reported feeling better for only one day following the first session. Starting the second week, she got such a burst of energy after the treatment that she got a lot of work done the day of the treatment, and this continued for the duration.

The most noticeable improvement was in the subjective areas of mood. Her anxiety disappeared, and areas of discomfort she daily indicated on a figure shrank and grew fewer. Sleep improved slightly, although sleeping through the night did not. “Waking up refreshed” stayed the same throughout the study.

Please see the attachment for the journal questions.

Question	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
1) How do you feel	6.83	7.29	8.42	6.57	7.29
2) Slept well	Yes 1/6	Yes 3/7	Yes 3/7	Yes 4/7	Yes 3/7

3) Slept thru night	Yes 2/6	Yes 0/7	Yes 0/7	Yes 0/7	Yes 0/7
4) Wake refreshed	Yes 4/6	Yes 4/7	Yes 4/7	Yes 4/7	Yes 4/7
5) Discomfort level	4.66	3.00	3.57	4.14	3.28
6) Anxiety level	2.83	0.50	0.00	0.00	0.00
7) Mood overall	7.30	7.85	7.57	7.57	7.85

Boxes contain the averages of answers over days answered.

I observed that my Subject seemed very engaged and enthusiastic about the effects she was feeling from the reflexology sessions. Although at first reluctant to participate, she now wants to keep receiving reflexology for the long term.

Recommendation

My recommendation for this client would be to continue meeting once per week, then try every other week, and then every four weeks, adjusting frequency according to need. If she were able, even starting with twice per week, as originally planned, could bring even greater benefits.

I also recommend future research done, with a more robust design like the Icelandic study cited above. There are people suffering with fibromyalgia who are so debilitated by the syndrome that it renders them incapable of showing up to work. Stronger research demonstrating that they could benefit from this natural, alternative, side effect free “healing art” could encourage them to seek its relief.

Conclusion

Although Fibromyalgia Syndrome’s cause is unknown, the discomfort and pain experienced is very real for persons suffering with it. Thus far, there is no known medical cure. Because taking analgesics over long periods of time can be harmful, finding “non-drug therapies” such as reflexology can greatly benefit this population. My subject for this study is one of 5 of my clients with FMS. Of them, she is exceptional for her upbeat spirit, and her ability to earn a living, particularly with such a physical profession. The rest are disabled. While it is not possible to generalize the effects of Reflexology from a study on one subject for the entire population of persons suffering from FMS, I believe further study is warranted. It is estimated that some 5 to 8 million persons suffer from FMS.

Citations:

[1] https://www.niams.nih.gov/health_info/Fibromyalgia/

Very Sad

Really Happy

8) Did your mood lift, if you were low?

Yes

No

9) Please indicate areas of specific discomfort on the figure, if experienced in the past day.