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Title Effects of reflexology on fibromyalgia symptoms: A multiple case study Journal Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice Authors Gunnarsdottir TJ, Peden McAlpine C Reference Volume 16, Issue 3, August 2010, Pages 167-172

Disease / illness Fibromyalgia Type of study Multiple Case Study (developed by Stake) Number of clients 6 Control type Qualitative analysis no control

Aim – To examine whether participants experience changes of pain, or other symptoms during multiple reflexology treatments, in the study period.

People who suffer from fibromyalgia (FM) experience pain in the muscles, ligaments and tendons. Symptoms include pain, fatigue, headaches, concentration problems, morning stiffness and sleep disturbances – waking up feeling un-refreshed, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and multiple chemical sensitivity syndrome. http:/www.ukfibromyalgia.com/what-is-fm.html

Methods Six women aged between 27 to 55 (mean age 39) diagnosed with FM were given ten treatments of reflexology, lasting 45 minutes plus any extra time for specific areas. At the end of each session the participant relaxed for at least 10 – 15 minutes. Each case was looked at individually (within case) and then the individual results were amalgamated and examined as a whole (cross case) to give an assessment of the effects of reflexology on FM. A qualitative design was used including private, taped interviews, observation during all sessions, and daily symptom diaries for 13 weeks starting one week before the first session and ending two weeks after the last treatment. Symptoms included sleep quality, medication and sensations of pain. The women were also asked to mark the different sites of their pain on a diagram of the body and evaluating the strength of the pain at each site using a Numerical Rating Scale (NRS). For each participant pain was mapped out as a graph, using the information from the diaries.

Results  All seemed to have suffered from an accident/shock/traumatic experience identified as the starting point of the FM.  In the 6th to 8th week, four of the six women noted changes in well being and felt much better rather suddenly during the 8th and 9th week of treatment.  Patterns of sleep did not change much for any of the participants.

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 For those who showed decreased pain the pain got worse before it improved after the 7th or 8th sessions.  In four out of the six cases the pain changed during the study, became more isolated and decreased in severity, and the areas that responded best were the head shoulders neck and arms.  Some other symptoms also responded to the reflexology such as migraine headaches, oedema and faecal elimination, but this did not continue after the study period ended.  Work and events in their lives affected the way they felt during the study and affected their FM. Five women did not feel as tired and three women had increased control over symptoms and felt they could cope better with work and responsibility.

Conclusions Reflexology may help to decrease the experience of pain in patients with FM, however, since there were only six participants it cannot be transferred to other populations. Since most of the benefits both in wellbeing and pain reduction occurred during the 6th to 8th weeks of treatment it indicates that a prolonged period of treatment needs to take place before benefits are apparent. Also since the pain got worse before it decreased future patients should be made aware of this possibility. The reflexology treatment did not appear to help with the poor sleep quality of the women taking part in the study One of the women taking part had very severe symptoms and she derived very little long lasting benefit from the treatments.

Comments The researchers point out that the women prioritised their lives around work and families and that the reflexology treatments had raised their awareness of the need to take more care of themselves to enable them to take more control of their lives in order to change their situations. Although the researchers suggest that an average of 4 -10 cases is thought to be most appropriate for a multiple case study the small numbers involved does limit the extent to which these studies can be generalised to other populations. However, the study does suggest that multiple reflexology treatments can have an effect on pain and other symptoms in people diagnosed with fibromyalgia.