

Feet first

Reflexology focuses on pressure points in the feet to ease stress and other conditions

When is a foot rub more than a foot rub?

When it's reflexology, an ancient form of body work gaining in popularity as consumers continue to explore complementary therapies.

Evidence supporting the value of reflexology is anecdotal, but the National Cancer Institute of the National Institutes of Health has funded a two-year study on whether reflexology can relieve pain in people with cancer. Meanwhile, practitioners in the metropolitan St. Louis area say interest here is growing, and two medical doctors say reflexology does have some merit.

Dr. Rick Lehman, a board-certified orthopedic surgeon in St. Louis, said he is impressed with some uses of reflexology.

"I do a lot of work with Olympic athletes, and they use practitioners who practice reflexology and other pressure-point therapy," he said. "What I've seen of it has been very positive - I've had athletes get better from it. A lot of these therapies get a bad rap because doctors who don't understand the treatments say they are bad. I may not understand reflexology or know how to do it, but I've seen it work when used for soft-tissue problems."

Lehman added that the treatment would not be appropriate for a number of illnesses, such as diabetes and liver cancer.

Dr. Jeffrey Brooks, a board-certified podiatrist, took a more cautious approach, saying he gives reflexology "mixed reviews." Brooks addressed the philosophy of the therapy, which, is that pressure applied to the feet is said to stimulate other parts of the body, which may lead to restoration of the body's natural equilibrium.

A lot of the nerves through the skeletal system do go through the foot, and certainly the lower-back area has branches of nerves that affect the foot," he said. He then listed some specific nerves that end in the foot, although he doubted that reflexology would be helpful for a number of complaints, then added, "Still, rubbing of all those areas does feel good - I love massage myself," he said.

The American Medical Association places reflexology in the category with alternative therapies such as acupressure, acupuncture and massage therapy, according to spokeswoman Lori Bolas. As such, she said, the AMA says more research is necessary to validate the therapy's effectiveness. It also cautions doctors to educate themselves on alternative therapies and cautions patients not to stop conventional therapy.

Certified reflexologists, about 25,000 of them registered worldwide through the International Institute of Reflexology, are quick to point out that the practice is a complementary therapy, not intended as a replacement for medical attention. Also, reflexology is not a diagnostic tool and does not claim to cure anyone.

A runner's story

Some people seek reflexology treatments as a way to relax the mind and body. Others have treatments in the hope of relieving a variety of acute and chronic conditions. Miguel Cotignola, 33, credits reflexology with allowing him to

participate in marathons in spite of running on a leg with a pin in it.

"I broke my leg in college while playing soccer," said Cotignola, who works as a network engineer and lives in Creve Coeur. "I had two pins in it for a long time, but now there is just one. I had tried deep massage therapy for my leg, and that made it feel better, but it didn't help me run. A friend recommended reflexology."

While in training for the Chicago Marathon in October, Cotignola ran up to 40 miles a week. "My leg muscles were really tight," he said.



Reflexology practitioner Paula Stone works on the feet of Miguel Cotignola at Soft Touch Massage & Reflexology in Florissant.

After he started reflexology treatments about five months ago, his leg got a lot better. "I go for a treatment every three weeks now to stay in shape," he said. "My next goal is to participate in a triathlon, so I've just started swimming."

Paula Stone, a certified reflexologist, is so proud of Cotignola, who is one of her clients, that she can recite his finishing time at the recent marathon - 3 hours, 53 minutes and 49 seconds.

That said, Stone, who earned her certification 10 years ago, takes no credit for the improvement in Cotignola's leg.

"My goal is to balance and normalize the body," she said. "In reality, I don't do anything to you. If I use the reflexology techniques correctly, the body will normalize and balance itself." Stone owns Soft Touch Massage & Reflexology, with offices in Florissant and St. Charles.

Some practitioners go through 300 or more hours of training before applying for certification. Others, seeking certification as massage therapists, learn a less intensive version of reflexology. Kathy Range offers reflexology treatments at Scandals Day Salon in Oakville.

"Reflexology is a targeted massage, and the benefits are many," said Range, a certified massage therapist for the past nine years. "Interest in reflexology definitely has increased over the last five years, as more people have learned about it."

Range did issue this cautionary note: "Be sure you tell people that reflexology isn't just a foot massage. This involves more pressure, and for some, it can be less relaxing."

Pain relief

LaVerne Kammer, who is one of Range's clients, is not as concerned about whether the treatment may be uncomfortable as she is about getting relief for aching feet and legs.

"As the women in my family get older, we tend to have arthritis in our feet, with aching and burning sensations," said Kammer, 70, of

Amon. "The doctors have no answers, but I have found that reflexology relieves the aching and burning for a while. Besides, it's a relaxing time, and it revitalizes you."

Sharon Turney also finds reflexology treatments relaxing. Turney, 58, is a water aerobics instructor who has had three screws in one toe since foot surgery about a year ago.

"Reflexology makes my toe more flexible," said Turney, who lives in St. Peters. "It also helps get the knots out of my body and relaxes me."

She said the treatment doesn't hurt "unless the practitioner hits a sore spot, and then they have to work it out." Turney added, "Paula Stone found spots on my feet to get pain out of my lower back. I won't give her up."

Sister Kate Filla, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet who helps administer a support services program for her order, has had a part-time practice in St. Louis for about 18 years.

"Reflexology is a wonderful tool to stimulate the body's self-healing properties, because it is based on the physiology of the foot, which is a microcosm for the whole body," said Sister Filla, who earned her certification in 1993.

She produced a photograph of a drawing from a wall in the Physicians' Tomb at Saqqara in Egypt that dates to about 2330 B.C.

One frame of the drawing shows a person rubbing another person's foot; in the next frame, a person is rubbing another's hand.

In 1913, Dr. William Fitzgerald introduced reflexology to the West as "zone therapy," noting that areas on the feet and hands were "linked to other areas and organs of the body within the same zone."

Then, according to the Association of Reflexologists, in the 1930s, Eunice Ingham further developed the "zone theory" into what is now known as modern-day reflexology.

Sister Filla treats one client who first came to her with a specific complaint, but has continued to schedule treatments for more than three years, though her pain eased long ago.

Sister Filla said that when friends ask the woman why she continues to have treatments, her response is that she is feeling great.

There is no one "right" number of treatments for any particular complaint, Sister Filla said. "It depends on the situation. I have seen immediate results; a man I know who had pain around his heart got relief after one treatment. He was so impressed that he became a reflexologist."

Sister Filla said she particularly enjoys teaching reflexology to individuals and groups. "I spent 25 years as a high school teacher, so I am equipped to teach. Besides, I know my material, and I like meeting people who want to learn it."

Her face lit with enthusiasm, Sister Filla continued, "I believe that reflexology belongs in every home, in every family and as a useful therapy in every support group. You don't have to be a professional to manage symptoms."

*By Patricia Corrigan
of the Post Dispatch*