Lesson 10: Contra-indications to Massage

OBJECTIVES OF THIS LESSON

- Explain the contraindications to massage treatment:
  - requiring medical consent
  - total contra-indications
  - local contra-indications
- Describe appropriate course of action for common conditions.

What is a contra-indication?

A contra-indication is a reason or situation that either prevents treatment being carried out or that the treatment needs to be adjusted to suit the client's specific need.

Massage is non-invasive, relaxing, and natural. It is therefore generally considered a safe treatment for most people. However, there are two types of contra-indication:

- With GP, medical or specialist permission (or a signed indemnity form)
- Contra-indications that restrict treatment (either totally or locally)

Before commencing with any treatments, it is vital the client is checked for contra-indications.

Does a contra-indication mean a treatment cannot take place?

Not always, however if you are concerned about giving a massage or unfamiliar with a condition, it is best to refer the client to their GP for advice. Remember, that the client is likely to know a fair amount about their condition, so ask them to tell you more about it.

A therapist should not, under any circumstances, attempt to diagnose a condition or decide whether an existing condition is treatable. This is vastly acting outside the scope of massage therapy.

The code of conduct for many complementary health associations states that diagnosis is not allowed. If you have any concerns, always refer the client to their doctor for advice

Types of Contraindication

Contra-indications that restrict treatment totally

This means that no massage treatment should be carried out.

Require GP permission or signed indemnity/consent form

The client may be able to receive a treatment - but written medical permission should be obtained before treatment, to ensure it is safe and beneficial to the client.

In circumstances where written medical permission cannot be obtained the client must sign an informed consent stating that the treatment and its effect has been fully explained to them and that they are willing to proceed without permission from their GP or specialist.

Once permission has been granted – caution is required during treatment and the massage must be adapted to suit the client's individual needs.

Contra-indications that restrict treatment locally

The client can receive a treatment - but it will need to be adapted to suit their specific needs and areas of their body may need to be avoided.

General considerations

As a massage therapist, you must be aware of the following guidance.

If a client is having a condition treated by medical professional, or another complementary therapist, you should never specifically treat the same condition as it may interfere with the course of treatment. Ask client to check with their consultant or therapist if a massage will be beneficial at present, and/or how it may be adapted to suit. This is also the case for any prescription medication.

You should **not continue with a treatment at all** if any of the following apply to the client:

- Has a fever (>37.8°c).
- Is feeling nauseous or experiencing vomiting or diarrhea.
- Has an infectious disease.
- Is in the first trimester of pregnancy.
- Is under the influence of alcohol and recreational drugs.
- Has had an accident, injury or surgery within the last 3 months (6 months if major).

Contraindications to Massage Treatment

The following table provides guidance on appropriate course of action for a number of common ailments or conditions. This does not replace qualified medical recommendations.

	Condition	Description	Type of Contraindication	Treatment Notes
Cardiovascular	Angina Pectoral	Reduced blood supply to the heart, causing spasm and pain in the chest area	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	
	Arrhythmia	Abnormal / irregular heartbeat	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	
	Arteriosclerosis	Accumulation of fatty substances in the walls of the arteries causing them to narrow and harden	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	
	Carotid Bruit	Irregular heart murmurs in the cervical region	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Massage should be slow and given with light pressure.
	Haematoma	A haematoma is a severe bruise within the soft tissues, usually a muscle. It often results from an injury. Symptoms will often resolve over time, but it can take several months before all the bruising and swelling goes.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	when the condition is severe the area must be completely avoided. Internal and external infections are the greatest dangers.
	Haemophilia	A condition of diminished or absence of blood clotting. Anyone suffering from this condition will bruise and bleed easily. Deep pressure could cause internal bleeding – haematoma.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Pressure must be kept light.

	Hypertension	Clinically high blood pressure	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	
	Hypotension	Clinically low blood pressure	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	
	Localised swelling or inflammation (in the treatment area)	The five classical signs of inflammation are heat, pain, redness, swelling, and loss of function. Inflammation can indicate infection.	Avoid area completely.	Advise client to see their doctor if condition doesn't improve.
	Oedema (Medical)	An accumulation of excess lymph fluid in the body, oedema is the increase of interstitial fluid in any organ, tissues, or cavities. It may indicate several dangerous conditions.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Only an experienced therapist should undertake treatment.
	Oedema (Non-medical)	Oedema is swelling. With an injury, swelling may be localized and often corrects itself. Subcutaneous oedema commonly occurs in women before menstruation but does subside if legs are rested in a raised position.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Gentle massage can be given to help alleviate the condition.
	Phlebitis	A painful condition where the lining of a vein in the legs becomes inflamed and may result in thrombosis.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	
	Thrombosis	A clot forming on the vein wall, usually in the leg.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Any pressure applied to the vein may dislodge the clot with potentially dangerous circumstances. Massage of the leg is a definite total contra-indication. Light pressure elsewhere.

Digestive	**Varicose veins and varicose ulcers**	Swollen and enlarged veins that are usually blue or dark purple. They may also be lumpy, bulging or twisted.	Any obvious protruding vein must be avoided – massage above the veins can help relieve the pressure. Also avoid treatment below the varicose veins.	Gentle massage above the veins only.
	Gastric (stomach) ulcer	Open sores that develop on the lining of the stomach.	Massage is locally contraindicated in the area of any ulcer. With regard to a peptic ulcer, abdominal massage can make symptoms worse.	
	Vomiting and diarrhoea (particularly when acute)	Vomiting and diarrhoea cause the body to be dehydrated. Typically, a sign of infection.	Massage totally contra-indicated. Increased stimulation may interfere with the body's own healing process.	Advise client to return home and get plenty of rest / fluids or to seek medical advice.
Endocrine	**Diabetes**	A group of metabolic disorders characterized by a high blood sugar level over a prolonged period of time.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	
Immune	**HIV (human immunodeficiency virus)/ AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome)**	HIV is a virus that damages the cells in the immune system and weakens the ability to fight everyday infections and disease. AIDS The breakdown of the immune system makes the receiver susceptible to any pathogens the therapist may carry.	HIV requires GP permission or a signed indemnity form. Massage is regarded as totally restricted for clients with AIDS.	Massage can be greatly beneficial, but only after approval with medical advice. In serious/late-stage cases where terminal,

Infectious Disease		HIV is rarely life-threatening these days and is typically managed with medicine.		a gentle hand massage, encouraging words, compassion and empathy are an equally valuable form of treatment to release stress and anxiety.
	Localized infections	For example, Herpes simplex, boils, verruca, athlete's foot.	Danger of cross infection – avoid the area completely.	
	Acute infectious & contagious diseases	Examples include: Scabies, Impetigo, Ringworm, Shingles, Measles, Pediculosis, Tuberculosis, Hepatitis, Influenza.	Massage totally contra-indicated. Danger of cross-infection – passing condition on to therapist and possibly next client.	Advise client to seek medical advice if not already done so.
	Fever	A fever is any body temperature elevation over 100°F (37.8°C). Fever generally occurs in response to an infection and is an important immune system response.	Massage totally contra-indicated.	Be particularly mindful of fever during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider taking client's temperature prior to treatment to ensure no fever is present.
	Meningitis	Inflammation of the connective tissue (Meninges) that encircle the spinal column & the brain.	Massage totally contra-indicated. Highly contagious – especially in the early stages.	

Musculo-skeletal				
	Ankylosing Spondylitis	Chronic inflammation of the spine and the sacroiliac joints. The sacroiliac joints are in the lower back where the sacrum (the bone directly above the tailbone) meets the iliac bones (bones on either side of the upper buttocks). Chronic inflammation in these areas causes pain and stiffness in and around the spine.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Massage should be light. Percussion movements must be avoided.
	Cervical Spondylitis	Cervical spondylosis is a common, age-related condition that affects the joints and discs in your cervical spine, which is in your neck. It's also known as cervical osteoarthritis or neck arthritis. It develops from the wear and tear of cartilage and bones.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Massage should be light. Percussion movements must be avoided.
	Hereditary spastic paraplegia	a general term for a group of rare inherited disorders that cause weakness and stiffness in the leg muscles. Symptoms gradually get worse over time.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Relaxing and light pressure massage is recommended. Percussion movements must be avoided.
	Hernia	A hernia is when an internal part of the body, such as an organ, pushes through a weakness in the muscle or surrounding tissue wall.	Gentle massage can be given - the herniated area must be avoided completely.	Gentle massage recommended.
	Muscular spasticity (thus conditions which cause this e.g., cerebral palsy)	Spasticity is a condition in which muscles stiffen or tighten, preventing normal fluid movement. The muscles remain contracted and resist being stretched, thus affecting movement, speech and gait.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Relaxing and light pressure massage is recommended. Percussion

				movements must be avoided.
	Osteoporosis	A condition where the bones become thin and weak and break easily. Bones start to lose density, particularly of calcium and collagen. It frequently goes undiagnosed until a fracture occurs, as there are no warning signs. The spine, wrist and hips are particularly vulnerable to fracture. It is more common in elderly people, particularly in women after the Menopause. The onset is usually after 60 years of age.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Relaxing and light pressure massage is recommended. Percussion movements must be avoided.
	Recent sprains, fractures, or muscle strains in the treatment area	There may be damage to the ligament, tendons and muscle fibres.	Injury must be allowed to heal before massage in the affected area can take place. Fractures – allow a minimum of 3 months before massage treatment on the area.	
	Rheumatoid Arthritis	Caused by inflammation of the joint and the synovial membrane, which eventually causes the erosion of the cartilage and bone. Usually affects the feet, ankles, fingers, and wrists.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Relaxing and light pressure massage is recommended. Percussion movements must be avoided.

Musculo-skeletal	**Slipped Disc - prolapsed or herniated disc**	A common back complaint, which affects the fibres of the intervertebral discs. The shock-absorbing discs in the spine are made up of a strong outer fibrous coat that contains soft gel-like material. A prolapsed disc occurs when the gel-like material pushes out from between the vertebrae. A herniated disc occurs when the outer coat ruptures. Pain is caused when the disc puts pressure on the surrounding nerves or spinal cord. A slipped disc is most common in the lower back, but it can also occur in the neck and upper back. It is most likely to occur between the ages of 25 and 45 and is slightly more common in men.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	It is a very painful and debilitating condition, and it is best to refer any client to a good Chiropractor or Osteopath. Relaxing and light pressure massage only. Percussion movements must be avoided.
	Spinal Deformities	A side-to-side curve is called scoliosis; a forward curve (kyphosis) shifts the centre of balance in front of the hip; a concave lower back (lordosis) thrusts the hips forward.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Relaxing and light pressure massage is recommended
	Spondylosis	Degeneration of the joints and intervertebral discs of the spine causing pain in the neck and lumber region.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Relaxing and light pressure massage is recommended. Percussion movements must be avoided.
	Whiplash injury (recent)	Caused by the sudden forwards and backwards jerking of the head and neck, usually in a car accident – but can be caused by strenuous sports. This stretches and tears the soft tissues of the neck - the tendons, ligaments & muscles – usually the Splenius capitus and Sternocleidomastoid muscles and may damage the nerves and other structures in the area, such as the cervical vertebrae and spinal cord.	Avoid neck and shoulder area for a minimum of 3 months. Best practice advice is to check any x-rays have been signed-off by a medical practitioner before treatment.	Relaxing and light pressure massage is recommended. Percussion movements must be avoided.

Nervous system		It is also known as cervical sprain or hyperextension injury.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	
	Bell's palsy	Paralysis of the face muscles caused by infections, the result of a stroke or basal skull injuries.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Massage must be soft and gentle. Percussion and vibration movements must be avoided.
	Epilepsy	Epilepsy is a common condition where sudden bursts of electrical activity in the brain cause seizures or fits.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	A very gentle massage only as over stimulation may trigger a fit. Avoid friction movements around the occipital and facial area. Percussion and vibration movements must be avoided.
	Migraine	A migraine can feel like a throbbing headache, usually on 1 side of the head. Other symptoms include feeling sick and sensitivity to light.	Massage totally contra-indicated during an attack only.	Migraine sufferers' benefit from massage but should not have treatment during an attack.
	Motor Neurone Disease	A fatal, rapidly progressing neurological disease. It attacks the nerves that control movement (motor neurones) so that muscles no longer work. Motor neurones control important muscle activity such as gripping, walking, speaking, swallowing and breathing.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Massage must be soft and gentle. Percussion and vibration movements must be avoided.

	Multiple Sclerosis (MS)	A condition that can affect the brain and spinal cord, causing a wide range of potential symptoms, including problems with vision, arm or leg movement, sensation or balance. It's a lifelong condition that can sometimes cause serious disability, although it can occasionally be mild.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Massage must be soft and gentle. Percussion and vibration movements must be avoided.
	Neuritis	Inflammation of a nerve.	Massage totally contra-indicated. Massage would be too painful – increased body stimulation increases the pain level.	
	Parkinson's disease	A progressive disease caused by degenerative abnormalities in the brain and characterized by tremor, or shaking hands and limbs, and by stiffness in movements.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Massage must be soft and gentle. Percussion and vibration movements must be avoided.
	Psychosis	Psychosis is a condition of the mind that results in difficulties determining what is real and what is not real. Symptoms may include delusions and hallucinations. Other symptoms may include incoherent speech and behaviour that is inappropriate for the situation. There may also be sleep problems, social withdrawal, lack of motivation, and difficulties carrying out daily activities.	Seek medical advice to ensure the deep relaxation caused by massage will not trigger any emotional problems. Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Massage should be gentle and can be useful for treating these conditions, if used properly, as a means of reducing the anxiety and stress causing it.
	Sciatica (trapped/pinched nerve)	Condition caused by entrapment of the long Sciatic nerve as it exits from the spine. The nerves become inflamed and cause pain in the buttocks and thigh.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	Massage must be soft and gentle. Percussion and vibration movements must be avoided.

Reproductive	**Undiagnosed pain**	Pain where the client does not know the reason.	Massage totally contra-indicated.	Advise them to see their Doctor before you give them a treatment.
	Hormonal contraceptive implant	A small flexible plastic rod placed under the skin in the upper arm. It releases the hormone progestogen into the bloodstream to prevent pregnancy.	If it can be felt, the local area should be avoided.	Light movements may be used across the skin to join up the routine.
	Menstruation	Menstruation (also known as a period) is the regular discharge of blood and mucosal tissue from the inner lining of the uterus through the vagina. The menstrual cycle occurs due to the rise and fall of hormones.	Avoid abdomen in the first few days – depending how client feels, as there is a risk of increased blood flow and may be painful.	
	Pregnancy	Pregnancy usually lasts about 40 weeks, or just over 9 months, as measured from the last menstrual period to delivery. The first trimester is typically defined as the first 12 weeks, the second from weeks 13 – 27 and the third from week 28 until childbirth.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form. Massage should not be given in the first trimester, as there is a risk of miscarriage. In second and third trimester, gentle massage can be given. Seek medical advice for massage of the abdomen or avoid.	As a rule – overall pressure should be kept light. Avoid deep pressure around the occipital and lumber areas, at all times during the pregnancy.
	Gynaecological infections e.g. thrush	Increased blood circulation could aggravate inflammation and worsen infection.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	

Respiratory	**Asthma**	Asthma is a long-term condition in which over-sensitive airways become narrow and inflamed, making it difficult to breathe in and out normally. Its cause isn't completely understood, but asthma is one of a group of allergic conditions, including eczema and hay fever, which often occur together.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	If your client requires medication – ensure they have their inhaler with them.
Skin	**Disorders affecting the treatment area**	For example: severe eczema, psoriasis, dermatitis, allergy reactions, active alopecia, acne vulgaris, acne rosacea.	Only contra-indicated if weeping as there is a danger of aggravating the condition and causing infection.	Always ensure the client is not sensitive to the massage medium used.
	Scar tissue	A scar is an area of fibrous tissue that replaces normal skin after an injury. Scars result from the biological process of wound repair in the skin, as well as in other organs and tissues of the body. Thus, scarring is a natural part of the healing process.	Avoid localised area for: 2 years – for major operations/ large areas of scarring 6 months – for minor operations / small scar	
Urinary	**Kidney infections / disorders Including cystitis**	The kidneys are unable to absorb the correct substance from filtration. Stimulation of lymphatic flow could put further strain on the kidneys.	Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	
Other	**Cancers**	Massage stimulates the Lymphatic and Circulatory systems. Cancerous cells are carried within the lymph and blood circulation.	In the early stages of cancer, massage is not recommended, as there is a danger of spreading the cancerous cells. Require GP permission or signed indemnity form.	In the later stages and during remission, any form of bodywork can help reduce the anxiety and stress, but should be carried out with medical permission, and the

				treatment needs to be adapted to suit the receiver's individual needs.
	Extensive bruising, cuts, abrasions, or sunburn in the treatment area		Avoid area completely.	
	Heavy meal within 2 hours	A heavy meal should be avoided in the two hours prior to massage treatment. The client risks nausea, indigestion, bloating and general discomfort.	Localised contra-indication. If a client has eaten a heavy meal, massage could be limited to face, arms, and legs. – avoiding abdomen and lower back.	
	Recent surgery	Surgical operation within 6 months. Major surgery normally involves opening the body. Includes caesarean section, organ replacement, Minor surgical procedures are those that are minimally invasive. Include biopsies, laparoscopy amongst others.	Major surgery; no massage for a minimum of 6 months, thereafter only with medical advice/ indemnity. Minor surgery; no massage for a minimum of 3 months, thereafter only with medical advice / indemnity.	
	Under the influence of alcohol and/or recreational drugs	Increased blood circulation could exacerbate the effects of the drug/s.	Massage totally contra-indicated.	Be sure to advise clients when they book that they should avoid alcohol and

				drugs on the day of their treatment.
	Undiagnosed lumps and bumps	Any lumps or bumps which the client has not had diagnosed or medically assessed.	Avoid area completely - and advise client to see their doctor.	

References

Tosch, H., 2014. *Massage and Medication | Massage Therapy Journal*. [online] American Massage Therapy Association. Available at: <https://www.amtamassage.org/publications/massage-therapy-journal/massage-and-medication/> [Accessed 2 January 2021].