

Let's Talk About ... Um ... Erections

Don't Let Fear Keep You from the Benefits of Massage

By Sarah A. Ryan-Knox

Getting a professional therapeutic massage is supposed to be a relaxing, healing experience. But for some men, fear of having an erection during the session prevents them from pursuing bodywork.

We realize the topic is taboo and uncomfortable to discuss, but understanding the body's physiological response to massage can help assuage those fears for men, and remind them that the benefits they receive from massage far outweigh the slight chance that an erection may happen during a session.

I have talked with men in social settings, outside of the massage office, who have admitted that they avoid getting massages because they are worried about having an erection.


The truth is, though, sometimes it just happens. Pia Poulsen, a massage therapist living in France, maintains a blog called *Massage and Wellness*. She writes, "When a person receives a massage and trust exists between the therapist and client, oxytocin is released into the blood. High levels of oxytocin can lead to erections,¹ something confirmed in a German study of rats injected with the hormone.² While it rarely happens, getting an erection during massage can be a normal response.

MANAGING THE RESPONSE

If you happen to get an erection during your session, your massage therapist may address the situation in one of several ways. He or she might simply move away from the legs, gluteal muscles, or abdomen and focus on areas not associated with the sacral or lumbar nerve plexuses. He or she may change techniques to those that are more invigorating, which will stimulate a sympathetic response from the body and help arousal pass. Or, he or she may simply ask you to turn over onto your stomach and work on your back, neck, and shoulders.

Feel free to address the situation with your therapist if you're comfortable doing so (or ignore it if you're not), ask for additional draping if you think it will help, or request that you would rather be on your stomach, but don't let fear or embarrassment deter you from massage.

If a client indicates any sexual intent, either verbally or nonverbally, the therapist will end the session immediately and terminate the therapeutic relationship.

Massage therapists help people integrate into their bodies, and they are trained to be understanding and empathetic. A well-behaving, well-intentioned client should feel comfortable returning to the massage table. Erections occur for a variety of complicated reasons. Don't let your fear of having one be a deterrent in getting a massage. 

Notes

1. Pia Poulsen, "Involuntary Erections and Oxytocin in Massages," *Massage and Wellness: For Clients and Therapists Alike* (blog), accessed March 2013, <http://blog.starkeys.com/lang/en-uk/2010/04/involuntary-erections-and-oxytocin-in-massages.html>.
2. G. Gimpl, F. Fahrenholz, "The Oxytocin Receptor System: Structure, Function, and Regulation," *Physiological Reviews* 81, no 2 (2001): 629–83.

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