



Lifestyle / Mind and Body

# What Exactly Is Visceral Manipulation (Organ Massage) and Is It Safe?

\*Go to your happy place while I poke my fingers around your gallbladder\*



By [Lauren Mazzo](#) | Mar 09, 2017

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Just hearing the word ~massage~ instills a feeling of relaxation in your body and instinctually makes you want to sigh. Getting rubbed down—even if it's by your S.O. who's cluelessly squeezing your traps...or your cat that's kneading/clawing on your lap—is never a bad thing. (Seriously. We [should all be seeing a masseuse](#) on the reg.)

But the latest fad flying around the internet health-o-sphere is a puzzler: organ massage, aka visceral manipulation.

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It's not a totally new revelation in the massage world. Visceral manipulation has been around since the mid '80s, when French osteopath Jean-Pierre Barral invented the technique, according to the [Barral Institute](#), the organization that he founded. But it's buzzing thanks to a *Vogue* writer who [tried it](#), and [other sites](#) that have picked up on the trend.

But the idea of someone poking around your internal organs is a little unsettling—what is organ massage, exactly? And more important, is it even *safe*?

The gist: It's a very gentle abdominal massage that can be performed by massage therapists, osteopaths, allopathic physicians, and other practitioners to treat things such as constipation, post-surgical adhesions, back pain, and even stress, mood, and sleep issues. The practitioner uses her hands to assess tense spots and gently compress and move certain soft tissues, feeling out for tender spots and scar tissue. Its effectiveness is still TBD, though, since current research is pretty conflicting, says Delia Chiaramonte, M.D., assistant professor of family and community medicine at the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Maryland's School of Medicine. (Although, it's worth noting that there are [health benefits associated with touch in general](#).)

For example, [one study found](#) that after a six-week period, visceral manipulation (in addition to standard pain treatment) didn't offer people with lower back pain any relief (when compared to the placebo group), but they did have less pain after 52 weeks of continued massage treatment. In research done on rats with abdominal adhesions, organ massage was found to both reduce and prevent the adhesions, as published in the *Journal of the American Osteopathic Association*. While it can't be assumed the same would hold true for humans, it gives a little merit to the practice of organ massage in general.

Considering the lack of hard science behind it, why would anyone want to try it?

Visceral fascial constriction can occur in the body, especially if there is scar tissue from abdominal surgery (like a C-section), for example, says Anna Esparham, M.D., clinical assistant professor of integrative medicine at the University of Kansas Health System. Think: similarly to those tight spots in your quads, but in the connective tissue around your organs. Massage—just like in your muscles—can help break this up.

The viscera (internal organs) are connected through nerves and connective tissue to other parts of the body, including skin and musculoskeletal tissue, explains Esparham. "So if skin and musculoskeletal tissue are affected by chronic pain, for example, it can affect the visceral organ it connects to over time."

But is it safe? After all, it's kind of weird for a stranger's fingers to be poking around between your most valuable goods.

"We don't recommend visceral massage to our patients because there isn't currently enough information about it," says Chiaramonte. However, "the technique is generally fairly gentle and, if done this way by a trained professional, is likely to be safe."

So if you're desperate to find something to fix your constipation or abdominal pain and want to go the natural route? Maybe organ massage is for you—just be sure to get the A-OK from your doc, and see a legit professional (not some rando guy handing out "free massage" cards on the street). But if you're looking to nix stress, get a good zen, or loosen up some tight muscles? Maybe stick with a regular rub-down or [sports massage](#) instead. (You could also go for these [yoga poses for self-massage](#) that are 100 percent free.)

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