

Massage Therapy for Allergy Relief and Improving the Immune System

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Many of our patients suffer from allergy symptoms. If we chase the symptoms such as a pressure in the sinus area, the patient may only get temporary relief. But, if we look at how allergies affect the body as a unit – in this case, the interconnected anatomical structure and function attributing to the sinus pressure, then we are able to see how all of the pieces of the puzzle fit together. Taking this larger view then helps us identify the modalities that will facilitate self-correction.

Early in my career as a massage therapist – nearly three decades ago, I studied CranioSacral Therapy with Dr. John Upledger. In his first class, I learned three key concepts that I use to this day on how to research, evaluate and treat each patient and their condition unique to them. These concepts can easily be applied to treating patients with allergy problems. They are:

1. **THE BODY IS A UNIT.**
Look at the body as an organized unit working together since conception, with history in each cell.
2. **STRUCTURE and FUNCTION are interconnected.**
The function of any part of the body is connected to its structure. And, structure depends upon its function.
3. **THE BODY IS SELF-CORRECTING.**
The body is constantly seeking homeostasis. Massage therapy facilitates the body's natural healing process.

To understand allergy symptoms, you start at a cellular level and find that our immune system is constantly working to correct anything that it sees as a foreign invader. The immune system overreacts to an **allergen** – that being something such as pollen, mold, food or insect stings. The immune system then releases a chemical called **histamine** that causes allergy symptoms that vary depending on the type of allergen. If the allergen is something you breathe in, your reaction can affect the eyes, nose and lungs. If it is something you eat, it may affect your mouth, stomach and intestines.

A part of the puzzle in the allergic process is in our blood stream known as **lymphocytes** (white blood cells), which are a fundamental component of the immune system. Lymphocytes guard the body against foreign invaders. Because these foreign invaders cause the production of **antibodies**, they are called antibody generators, or **antigens**. After the lymphocyte identifies an antigen, it will make its way back to a lymph node, change into a plasma cell and produce antibodies specifically engineered to fight that particular threat.

Stress can exacerbate allergy symptoms by increasing the production of histamines, which triggers the inflammatory response. Histamine increases permeability of the capillaries. Increased vascular permeability causes fluid to escape capillaries into the tissue, which leads to the classic symptoms of

allergic reaction: a runny nose and watery eyes. Therefore, by inducing relaxation, you can improve symptoms and immune function.

There are very few rules in CranioSacral Therapy that Dr. Upledger stressed as much as, “Always open the **Thoracic Inlet** before doing any work on or above the neck.” The reason is that the lymphatic drainage for the whole body drains into the venous system through the thoracic inlet. As a safety measure, open the thoracic inlet to insure when releasing muscles on or above the neck there will be a clear passage for fluid release and the system will not back up making symptoms worse or creating a headache.

The next puzzle piece in allergy relief is drainage of the antibodies out of key areas of the nasal passages. This drainage happens along the sinus tubes into the throat where contracted **Sternocleido-Mastoid** (SCM) muscles can restrict drainage. Relaxing the SCM can help drainage and often alleviate symptoms completely.

The SCM muscle gets its name from its three attachments. The superior attachment is at the mastoid process, just behind your ear. From that point it branches into two parts, extends down the neck to the manubrium of the sternum and the medial points of the clavicle.

The sinus tubes go through the branches in the SCM muscle. If a patient carries tension or does repetitive work that affects the neck, shoulders or upper chest, the SCM can clamp down on your sinus tubes. A patient with allergies and tight SCM can exacerbate the problem by preventing drainage.

At this point, my CranioSacral training kicks in with wanting to know the structure/function of the related cranial nerve involved in the neck and shoulder muscles. The SCM and trapezius are innervated by the (CNXI) **spinal accessory nerve**. The spinal accessory nerve enters the skull through the foramen magnum, the large opening at the base of the skull. The nerve courses along the inner wall of the skull toward the jugular foramen, through which it exits the skull. The spinal accessory nerve is known for being the only cranial nerve to both enter and exit the skull. Knowing the anatomy of the cranial nerve can direct us to where there might be impingement. The puzzle pieces take us to releasing the nerve, which releases the muscles, which encourages drainage and gives relief to the patient.

Interestingly, there are many muscles that can contain **trigger points** in the head and face to relieve sinuses; the two muscle groups that are involved in nearly every case are the Trapezius and Sternocleidomastoid muscle groups. Once again, both muscles are innervated by CNXI.

The **lymphatic system** is a complex network of ducts and vessels that transfer white blood cells and antibodies to your organs and tissues. These cells and antibodies arm your immune system and help your body combat infections. The lymph system must rely on hundreds of muscular units, your body movements, and water intake to move the lymph through the vessels. Normal lymph movement in the body can be reduced by stress, fatigue, inactivity, cold temperatures, infection, chemical or food additives, even one's age and heredity. By manually stimulating the increased flow of lymphatic fluid, it can reinvigorate your immune system and sweep out harmful toxins.

Have you been putting the puzzle pieces together to formulate what modalities you might use to

address any of the above issues – basic massage, Positional Release, Lymphatic Drainage, Trigger Points, CranioSacral Therapy, others? The essential oils in Aroma Therapy also offer great options.

I like educating my clients on the benefits of Massage Therapy for allergy relief (before and during symptoms) including that Massage Therapy:

- Relaxes the body, reducing stress that can exacerbate the symptoms of allergies
- Relieves neck and shoulder tension, which opens sinuses
- Moves lymph, which reduces irritation and inflammation
- Increases circulation
- Promotes a stronger and healthier immune system

There is such a wide spectrum of signs and symptoms a patient can exhibit from an array of antigens. Learning how the body is a unit, and discovering structure/function, you can facilitate self-correction for a wide variety of conditions.