

A Flair for Facial Massage

Exploring This Client Favorite

By Barbara Hey

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Ask any client, and no doubt she will tell you: The best part of any facial is the massage. After the work -- cleansing, exfoliating, extracting -- comes the fun: the soothing feel of hands and fingers artistically easing the tightness that quietly accumulates in the jaw line, chin, cheeks, and around the contours of the face.

The massage is the dessert of the facial, the reward. "Once the lights are off, then it's time for the massage, and that's what clients most look forward to," says Deedee Carlson, president of the San Francisco Skin Institute of Esthetics and Cosmetology. "The massage is the one thing that makes clients consistently come back," she says.

And the benefits, in addition to pleasure and relaxation, are many.

Facial massage improves circulation, stimulating blood flow to the skin and improving skin tone. It can help relieve tension and congestion, tone and tighten skin, and possibly even decrease fine lines and sagging.

Most estheticians learn the basics in school, but advanced training (see "Facial Massage, Advanced Techniques," sidebar): or even just practice and focus, can polish your facial massage skills for an above par or even signature service. "It takes a long time to really master these techniques," Carlson says. But, the effort you invest will build business and inspire customer loyalty, she says.

What It Is, What It Isn't

Because of the specific anatomy of the face, facial massage does not involve deep tissue work. "It's not a muscle massage, but much lighter," Carlson says. Done correctly and according to the particulars of the client's skin, the facial massage is stimulating but not irritating, invigorating but not vigorous. Instead, it takes a delicate touch, with gentle, even strokes using bits of Swedish massage, pressure point stimulation, and movements that promote lymph drainage.

The massage portion of the facial should be at least five and as many as 20 minutes,



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says Patricia Lam, cofounder of the Lam School of Advanced Esthetics in Scarborough, Ontario, and author of Practical Nutrition for the Health and Beauty Professional.

Carlson agrees. When the facial is compacted into an hour slot, she says, the massage time is generally cut. "If everyone would go back to the traditional European facial, 80 or 90 minutes, we'd all feel a lot better," Carlson says. Consequently, you may consider adding 10 or 15 minutes to your facial offering and ensuring clients receive the deep satisfaction that comes with facial massage -- which may just encourage them to book another appointment before they leave.

The Benefits

The news is all good. A massage can achieve an array of aftereffects, among them boosted circulation, decreased puffiness and inflammation, improved texture and skin tone, and, over time, skin that's firmer and smoother, with minimized fine lines and wrinkles -- all for a more radiant appearance.

"The massage increases circulation, so more nutrients come to the surface to nourish the skin, enabling it to function more efficiently," Lam says. Furthermore, massage softens the skin, helps eradicate impurities and toxins, tones muscles, decongests, and regenerates, she says. Massage can even ameliorate specific complaints, such as dark under-eye circles due to flagging circulation. (Of course, dark circles resulting from fatigue, illness, poor diet, or genetics are beyond any esthetician's control.)

As we age, the skin reflects the cascading effect of inflammation caused by the daily grind. Facial massage can serve as an antidote to these cumulative effects. "Anything we can do to decrease inflammation really helps," Carlson says.

This is also the case with puffiness. "If someone's all puffy just from being alive, she or he can really benefit from the manual lymphatic drainage," Carlson says. The key is to individualize the treatment, because what worked one month might not be appropriate the next.

Different Folks, Different Strokes

Here's where training, instinct, and careful observation come into play. The particulars of the facial massage -- how much stimulation, duration, and types of movements -- need to be determined by examining the skin and talking and listening to the client. "You need to consider the skin and the person's mood," says Lam, who has just created a video/DVD on her approach to facial massage.

The first assessment is skin type. "Every skin condition requires a different approach," she says. Sensitive skin, for instance, takes a light touch and short duration. In contrast, she says, thicker skin can take deeper stimulation, more "breaking down movements," like kneading to rid the skin of impurities. And loose, sagging skin has its own set of indications. "No pressure or downward movements -- all upwards," she says.

Also, Lam suggests, adjust for temperament. "Thicker skinned people usually carry more body weight and have less energy," she says. In this instance, Lam says she would use energizing techniques with more pressure and tapotement.

Another factor is looking at the treatment as a whole. "If there has been a lot of exfoliation or extractions [that day], then you need to let the skin calm down," Carlson says. In this case, a shorter, lighter, and more flowing facial massage would be called for so as not to overstimulate already red and inflamed skin. The focus can turn instead to massaging the neck and shoulders.

One final note: Consider how your client is feeling that day, and adjust the massage accordingly, just as you would the other ingredients of treatment. "If my client is upset and stressed, then, no matter what, she needs to relax," Lam says.

The goal, always, is for the client to walk away feeling like she can't wait to return.

Barbara Hey is a freelance health writer based in Boulder, Colo. Her work has appeared in several national publications, including Allure, Health, Alternative Medicine, and Parenting.