



A good massage starts long before you lie down on the table. Most people think the appointment begins when the therapist walks into the room, but the real experience is shaped by what happens in the hours before, the information you share, and the choices you make about timing, food, hydration, and communication.

Preparation does not need to be complicated. It does need to be intentional. When clients arrive rushed, dehydrated, overly full from lunch, or unsure what they want from the session, the work often feels less effective. When they come in with a clear sense of their goals and a realistic picture of how their body feels, the session tends to be more useful, more comfortable, and easier to tailor.

Massage Therapy covers a wide range of approaches, from gentle relaxation work to focused treatment for tight hips, neck pain, headaches, or post-exercise soreness. Because the field is broad, the best way to prepare depends in part on why you booked the session in the first place. A first-time spa massage before a vacation feels different from a clinical session meant to address recurring shoulder tension from desk work. The principles are the same, but the details matter.

Start with the purpose of the appointment

Before anything else, know why you are going. That sounds obvious, yet many clients book because they are generally sore, stressed, or overdue for self-care, then struggle to answer a simple intake question such as, “What would you like to focus on today?”

You do not need a perfect diagnosis. You do need a useful description. “My lower back feels tight after long drives.” “I clench my jaw when I am stressed.” “I want to relax, but I also have a knot between my shoulder blades that has been there for two weeks.” Those kinds of details help a therapist choose pressure, pacing, positioning, and technique.

If your goal is pain relief, think about patterns before you arrive. When does the discomfort show up? Is it sharp or dull? Does it travel? Does it worsen after workouts, at your computer, or while sleeping? If your goal is stress reduction, that matters too. A therapist may choose slower tempo, less talking, dimmer lighting, and a more general full-body approach rather than targeted deep work.

The more specific your goal, the easier it is for the session to match it.

Choose timing that works with your body, not against it

Scheduling can make or break the experience. If possible, avoid squeezing massage into a narrow gap between stressful obligations. A noon appointment sandwiched between two meetings rarely feels as restorative as one that gives you a little breathing room before and after.

Many people do best when they are not rushing from a workout, a heavy meal, or a long commute. Muscles that are slightly warmed by normal daily movement can respond well, but arriving sweaty, winded, or amped up from intense exercise is different. If you lift heavy or do high-intensity training right before the appointment, your body may already be irritated rather than simply tight.

Think about your own rhythms. Some clients love morning massage because they are mentally fresh and less distracted. Others prefer late afternoon because their muscles have loosened up by then. There is no universal best time. The right appointment slot is the one that lets you show up calm, punctual, and able to pay attention to your body.

It is also worth considering what comes after. If you have an hour-long deep tissue session and then plan to help a friend move furniture, you are not setting yourself up for the best result. Try to leave a little buffer if you can, even if it is only enough time to drink water, walk slowly to your car, and let your nervous system settle.

What to eat and drink beforehand

Clients often ask whether they should eat before massage. The practical answer is yes, but lightly. Arriving very hungry can make it hard to relax. Arriving overly full can make lying face down uncomfortable and may leave you feeling sluggish or slightly nauseated when pressure is applied around the back or hips.

A modest meal or snack one to two hours beforehand works well for most people. Think simple, familiar, and easy to digest. Oatmeal, yogurt, toast with eggs, fruit with nuts, or a sandwich are all more comfortable choices than a large burger and fries eaten in the parking lot.

Hydration matters too, though it is often overstated in strange ways. You do not need to force down liters of water because you booked a massage. You do want to arrive normally hydrated. Muscles and connective tissue tend to feel more reactive when someone is dehydrated, and some clients notice they feel headachy or fatigued after bodywork if they have barely had anything to drink all day.

Caffeine is worth a brief mention. A normal cup of coffee is usually fine if that is part of your routine. Several large coffees on an empty stomach right before the appointment can make it harder to settle. Alcohol before Massage Therapy is a poor idea. It blunts sensation, affects judgment, and can interfere with safe communication about pressure and comfort.

Hygiene and grooming, without overthinking it

Most adults worry a little about this, especially before their first session. The standard is simpler than people imagine. Shower if you reasonably can, arrive in clean clothes, and skip heavy perfume or strongly scented body products. Therapists work in close proximity and many clients are scent-sensitive. Clean skin is helpful. A cloud of fragrance is not.

Do not feel pressured to shave your legs, trim body hair, get a pedicure, or look polished in any special way. Therapists are there to work with bodies, not to inspect them. What matters most is basic cleanliness and respect

for shared space.

If you wear makeup, jewelry, belts, or a bulky watch, keep in mind that some of it may need to come off for comfort. Long necklaces and large earrings can get in the way. Contact lenses are fine, though some people prefer glasses if they plan to rest deeply and not worry about dry eyes when they get up.

Clothing, draping, and what “undress to your comfort level” really means

This is one of the most misunderstood parts of a first appointment. In most professional settings, you will be given privacy to undress and get under a sheet and blanket or other draping system. The therapist works only on the area being treated and keeps the rest of the body covered. You should never feel exposed.

“Undress to your comfort level” means exactly that. Some clients remove everything except underwear. Others keep underwear on. Some remain more clothed if the session is chair-based, sports-focused, or includes assisted stretching. The best option depends on the style of massage and your comfort. If you are unsure, ask before the session begins. A professional therapist will answer plainly and without awkwardness.

Wear easy, comfortable clothing to the appointment. Tight jeans, complicated shapewear, and boots with a dozen laces are not ideal when you are trying to transition in and out of a relaxed state. Soft clothing also helps if you feel a little tender afterward.

Health history is not paperwork for its own sake

The intake form can feel repetitive, but it exists for a reason. Be honest, even if something seems minor or unrelated. Recent injuries, surgeries, medications, pregnancy, high blood pressure, blood thinners, skin conditions, recent fever, and areas of numbness can all affect how Massage Therapy should be approached, modified, or postponed.

Clients sometimes leave out information because they do not want to be turned away or because they assume the issue does not matter. That is where avoidable problems happen. A therapist does not need your entire life story, but they do need accurate information to work safely.

If you are currently under medical care for pain, it is useful to say so. If you have had imaging, physical therapy, or a diagnosis, share it in plain language. “I was told it is a rotator cuff strain.” “My doctor thinks it is tension headaches.” “Physical therapy helped, but my calves still cramp.” These details help shape expectations.

There is also a difference between soreness and something more serious. If you have sudden swelling, severe unexplained pain, a fever, shortness of breath, or signs of acute injury, massage is not the first stop. In those cases, medical evaluation comes first.

The conversation to have before hands-on work begins

A strong therapist-client exchange does not need to be long, but it should be clear. The best sessions often begin with a few focused questions and direct answers.

Here are the points worth covering before the massage starts:

1. Your main goal for the session, whether that is relaxation, pain relief, recovery, or a mix.
2. Specific areas to focus on and areas to avoid, including old injuries, skin irritation, or spots that feel unusually tender.

3. Pressure preferences, including what “deep” means to you, since one person’s moderate pressure is another person’s limit.
4. Positioning needs, such as pregnancy bolsters, neck support, trouble lying face down, or sensitivity in the chest, shoulders, or low back.
5. How much you want to talk during the session, because some clients relax with quiet and others like brief check-ins.

That short conversation saves a surprising amount of guesswork. It also sets the tone that this is a collaborative process, not something being done to you while you stay silent and hope for the best.

Arrive early enough to settle

Five [Massage Therapy](#) to ten minutes early is often enough for a routine appointment. If it is your first visit, aim for a little more. New client paperwork, finding the office, using the restroom, and asking questions all take time. Showing up right at the start time while flustered from traffic means part of the session will be spent regulating your breathing and trying to mentally arrive.

Use those first few minutes well. Put your phone away. Take a breath. Notice if your jaw is clenched or your shoulders are up near your ears. These little check-ins help you transition from your day into the treatment.

If the practice has a cancellation or late policy, respect it. Bodywork businesses are usually appointment-based and time lost to late arrivals often cannot be recovered. If you are running behind, call. That courtesy matters.

Pressure, pain, and the myth that deeper is always better

Many people equate strong pressure with effective work. Sometimes that is true. Often it is not. Productive massage does not require gritting your teeth through ten out of ten discomfort. In fact, when pressure is too intense, the body may guard against it. Muscles tighten, breathing becomes shallow, and the nervous system shifts into resistance rather than release.

A more useful target for focused work is often moderate, tolerable intensity. You should feel that the therapist is contacting the tissue meaningfully, but you should still be able to breathe and stay present. If you catch yourself holding your breath, lifting your shoulders, curling your toes, or mentally trying to escape the sensation, the pressure is probably too much.

There are exceptions. Brief, precise work on a dense area can feel intense and still be appropriate. The key is that it remains controlled, communicative, and purposeful. “Hurts so good” can be real. “I am counting the seconds until this ends” is usually not therapeutic.

If your therapist asks about pressure, answer honestly. Do not say “it’s fine” out of politeness when it is not. Good Massage Therapy depends on feedback.

If this is your first appointment, expect a few unknowns

First sessions are partly treatment and partly information gathering. Even the best therapist cannot know your tissue response, your tolerance, or your preferences perfectly in the first ten minutes. That is normal.

You may discover that you dislike face cradle pressure on your forehead, need more support under your ankles, or feel chilly unless an extra blanket is available. You may realize that a full-body relaxation session leaves you happier than targeted neck work, or the reverse. These are useful findings, not signs that something went wrong.

A first appointment is also when some clients learn that the area causing pain is not always the only area worth treating. Tight glutes can influence low back tension. Forearm work can help with hand and wrist fatigue. Chest and front shoulder tension often contribute to upper back discomfort. An experienced therapist may connect these patterns and suggest a broader approach than you expected.

A few practical do's for the day of the session

Small choices on the day itself can make the appointment smoother and more comfortable.

- Use the restroom before the session starts.
- Silence your phone and leave it off your body, not in a pocket that will buzz mid-treatment.
- Remove jewelry that could catch, press into the skin, or distract you while lying down.
- Mention anything that changed since booking, such as a new injury, sunburn, headache, or medication.
- Plan a few quiet minutes afterward if possible, especially after deeper or longer work.

None of these are dramatic, but they improve the experience in a very practical way. A session interrupted by a full bladder, a vibrating smartwatch, or an unmentioned fresh strain is harder to tailor well.

Special situations that call for extra planning

Not every appointment is routine. Pregnancy, recent surgery, athletic events, chronic pain conditions, and trauma history all deserve more deliberate preparation.

For prenatal massage, ask whether the therapist is specifically trained and how they position clients. Side-lying support, bolsters, and trimester-specific modifications matter. If you are medically high risk, clearance from your prenatal provider may be appropriate depending on the circumstances and local standards.

If you recently had surgery, even if the incision itself is healed, timing and technique matter. Scar tissue work, swelling, altered sensation, and general tissue irritability all change what is appropriate. “I had surgery a few months ago and feel mostly fine” is useful information, but it may still call for a modified session.

Athletes often make the mistake of booking deep work immediately before a race or major lift. Some targeted treatment can help, but intense bodywork too close to performance can leave tissue feeling heavy, tender, or less springy than expected. For most people, corrective or deeper work is better placed several days before a major event, with lighter recovery-oriented work closer to it.

Clients with migraines, fibromyalgia, hypermobility, or a history of trauma may also need different pacing. Less pressure, more check-ins, shorter sessions, or gradual exposure to certain techniques can make the difference between relief and overload. The more openly these factors are discussed, the better.

What to do after the appointment

Preparation extends a little beyond the session itself. The first hour after massage is when many clients either support the result or undo it by jumping straight back into strain.

Stand up slowly. That sounds basic, but after lying down and deeply relaxing, some people feel lightheaded if they pop up too fast. Drink some water, not because massage “flushes toxins,” but because basic hydration supports normal recovery and many people simply feel better when they rehydrate.

Pay attention to how your body responds over the next day. Light tenderness can be normal after deeper work, much like the soreness after a new workout. Severe pain, bruising, numbness, or symptoms that feel wrong are

not normal and deserve follow-up. Most professional therapists want that feedback and can help you decide whether the response was expected or whether a different approach is needed next time.

It can also help to notice what changed. Did your range of motion improve? Did your headache ease? Did you sleep better that night? Did a certain area feel great during the session but tighten again after sitting at your desk for three hours? Those observations make the next appointment smarter.

Building a better experience over time

The best massage appointments often happen after two or three sessions, not because the first one failed, but because trust, information, and body awareness build over time. You learn how your body responds. Your therapist learns your patterns. The work gets more precise.

That does not mean you need to commit to a standing schedule if you do not want one. It simply means that Massage Therapy tends to improve when it is treated as a responsive process rather than a one-off luxury with no context.

Some clients benefit from monthly maintenance. Others come in around training cycles, stressful work seasons, or flare-ups of chronic tension. The right frequency depends on your goals, budget, and response. A responsible therapist should be able to discuss this without pressure or sales tactics.

Preparing well is less about ritual and more about clarity. Eat sensibly. Hydrate normally. Arrive clean and on time. Share your health history honestly. Say what you want from the session. Speak up about pressure, comfort, and positioning. Those habits are simple, but they make a noticeable difference. When you do them consistently, the session has a much better chance of feeling useful, safe, and worth your time.

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FAQ About Massage Therapy

What is massage therapy for?

Massage therapy is the hands-on manipulation of the body's soft tissues—including muscles, tendons, and ligaments—to ease stress, relieve pain, improve blood flow, and help the body heal. It acts as a part of integrative medicine to support both physical and mental wellness.

What is a normal tip for a \$100 massage?

For a \$100 massage, a normal and customary tip is \$15 to \$20, with \$20 (20%) being the most common standard for good service in a spa or salon setting.

Does massage help polymyalgia?

Massage can help relieve secondary muscle tension and stiffness associated with polymyalgia rheumatica (PMR), but it does not treat the underlying systemic inflammation and is not a substitute for medical treatment like corticosteroids. Opinions on Mayo Clinic Connect are mixed; while some patients find light, gentle massage relaxing, others report that deep or aggressive pressure can make inflammatory pain and soreness worse.