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Safety of pediatric massage: a systematic review.

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Background: General trends in the usage of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) show that public interest and demand for these therapies and products are increasing in both adult and pediatric populations. One of the most popular CAM therapies sought today is massage therapy. Recent Canadian data suggest that 26% of patients within a pediatric outpatient clinic had accessed massage services. While a 2003 systematic review focused on the safety of massage for adults, no studies investigating the safety of massage therapy for children and adolescents have been published.

Objective: To systematically review published literature for adverse events related to pediatric massage therapy.

Method: A comprehensive search strategy was developed in consultation with 2 massage therapists and was used to search 15 electronic databases from inception to June 2007. No language restrictions were applied. PubMed was searched for 180 days during data selection to capture any recently published articles not yet indexed in Medline. Articles were included if they met the following criteria: (1) Primary study or case report, (2) at least 1 pediatric patient (0-18 years) in study population, (3) massage intervention was applied, and (4) massage related adverse event was reported. Two independent reviewers screened and selected articles for further review and performed data extraction.

Results: Our search strategy identified 11 516 articles, 809 of which met the inclusion criteria for full-text review. From the 809 articles reviewed, 18 articles met the full inclusion criteria and proceeded to data extraction. Identified adverse events include local pain or soreness, swelling, mild fevers, and skin rashes. Thus far, the majority of adverse events reported have been mild with few moderate or serious adverse events occurring in pediatric patients.

Conclusion: This systematic review will be useful to healthcare providers and their patients to make informed decisions about the use of massage therapy in children and youth.