



Pharmacology and Massage Therapy

By: Susan G. Salvo, MEd LMT

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. -Marie Curie

Many of your clients use drugs to reduce pain, to minimize disease complications, as hormone replacement therapy, or to decrease anxiety and depression just to name a few. Drugs can be administered orally, by injection, through inhalation into lungs or nasal passages, or topically over the skin and through mucous membranes.

Learning about pharmacology and how it affects massage therapy should be a top priority for practicing therapists. What these meds do, how they are administered, and their side effects may alter your approach with a particular client. Additionally, many clients have multiple chronic conditions that are managed by meds. These situations add layers of complexity to treatment planning. For example, your client may be taking oral meds for chronic high cholesterol, use insulin injections regularly to manage diabetes, and recently started using testosterone crème. Do you know what to do?

Initially, you must inquire about medication use during the client intake. Use direct, focused questions because clients often forget to disclose this information. This includes information regarding over-the-counter drugs and herbal supplements. These agents may have side effects and possible implications for massage therapy. Next, ask why they are taking them if indicated. Medications are used for many reasons. For example, a client may take aspirin to reduce fever, to manage shoulder pain, or prevent or reduce the risk of stroke or heart attack. Modifications will vary depending on how the client answers this question. For example, a client who is taking oxycodone orally to relieve pain from a neck injury sustained five days ago during a car accident may require the use of stimulating techniques at the end of the session to help rouse an overly sedated client or assistance with sitting up and getting off the table. On the other hand, a client on this fourth day of oral antibiotic therapy for a strep throat may not require any treatment modifications.

Next, ask your client about side effects. The client's primary complaint may be related to a drug side effect, meaning that a headache targeted for the relief through massage may quickly return if it is the result of a drug side effect. Be sure your client is informed so appropriate and realistic treatment decisions can be made. Lastly, ask how the meds are administered? Depending on client response, use appropriate treatment modifications.

The field of pharmacology changes quickly so having access to the most current information is essential. Massage therapists are advised to use several reference books in their current editions. Some Internet websites such as the FDA (www.fda.gov), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) and National Institutes of Health (www.nih.gov) contain current drug information, as well as information related to specific diseases. Pharmacists are another great source of information. Remember, a little pre-planning and a good intake can create the foundation for condition-appropriate and client-centered treatment plans.

References:

Salvo SG: Mosby's Pathology for Massage therapists, ed 3, Philadelphia, 2013, Elsevier, Saunders.