

Reflexology Revealed

An ancient practice arrives in America

by Petula Brown

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While reflexology has been used for thousands of years in Asia, it just beginning to establish itself as a credible practice in the United States. Technically, it is the science of using the hands to apply pressure to the feet in order to ease pain, relieve tension, and restore energy. And Americans are starting to appreciate its benefits.

Frequently offered as a massage service now in American spas, reflexology concentrates on maneuvering the body's reflexes or meridians (paths within body used to move energy flows) to decrease tension. Reflexology can be done as part of a foot massage, but reflex points also exist within the hands and ears that correspond to various bodily organs and systems. The practice has been associated with numerous benefits including treatment of chronic upper and lower respiratory problems, muscle relaxation and improvement in lymphatic drainage.

"Most of the time, clients receive the service as a gift and don't know what to expect," says Nichelle

Sherwood, massage therapist at Nseyia Salon and Spa in Atlanta.

Few scientific studies have proven the link between reflex points and bodily systems, but practitioners cite that the practice (and its benefits) predates modern medicine. New York medical massage therapist Ruthmarie Stowe says, "Reflexology is much more complex than massage. It can influence how your body functions."

With gentle pressure, there may be minimal risk of physical harm, but there are some cautions.

"When I was pregnant, I was told that reflexology could induce labor if certain reflex points were stimulated," warns one frequent reflexology client. Reflexology can be incorporated into other spa services such as pedicures, manicures and facials. However, spa personnel should have enough training to recognize potential problems.