



amta  
american massage therapy association™

WORKING IN A  
**HEALTH  
CARE**  
ENVIRONMENT

AMTA CAREER SUCCESS SERIES



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WORKING IN A  
**HEALTH  
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# WHAT TO EXPECT

Whether you've just finished school and are exploring your career options, or you've been active in the massage therapy profession for a number of years and want to consider other work environments, AMTA is here to help you. No matter what level of experience you have, chances are you've got questions about the opportunities that exist for you as a massage therapist.

Although education and past professional experiences prepare massage therapists to practice in many different settings, landing a job in a health care environment may require some new perspectives on the massage therapy profession. Throughout this guide, you'll find information about health care environments in general, as well as some specific ways these work settings differ from others in massage therapy.

## WORKING ENVIRONMENT

The general consensus among many professionals who practice in a health care setting is that the most profound difference in this setting has more to do with *environment* than massage therapy skill-set.

In short, the massage skills you've learned in school are, in most cases, going to translate across nearly all the health care work settings because in many cases what's needed is what you've learned to do: reduce anxiety, help people manage pain and relieve symptoms of stress, to name a few. What's different is the *where*, not the *how*.

Just as massage therapy happening in a spa is not referred to as a technique, modality or "spa massage," many in the profession question the use of the term "medical massage" when describing massage used in varying health care settings. In other words, massage therapy happening in health care settings—from integrative care facilities to hospitals—is primarily defined by location, not the type of massage therapy being practiced.

*Generally speaking*, some of the main differences in environment are going to come from the health care work setting having, by its very nature, a more clinical feel. Even in these settings, however, massage therapists are still defined by the profession's scope of practice, so won't have the pressure of participating in the clinical decision-making tree.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE SPECIFIC DIFFERENCES?

OK, there are differences, but what are some of the specific ways health care environments are distinguished from other work settings?

> **Physical Space:** Typically, students and veteran massage therapists alike think of practicing in a dimly lit room, perhaps some peaceful music on in the background. In most, if not all health care work settings, the physical space where massage therapy is practiced is *vastly* different than what might normally be pictured.

Particularly when working in hospitals and nursing homes, massage therapists need to be comfortable moving around medical equipment, as many times you'll be seeing people who are attached to a monitor or IV, for example, or have a catheter or ventilator placed.

> **Climate** Massage therapists aren't often going to have control of the climate the same way they do in other work settings. You probably won't be able to adjust lighting the way you can in, say, a spa or your own practice's treatment room. In many cases, the massage therapy session takes place where the person is currently situated, like a hospital room or room in a nursing home, where bright lighting and frequent interruptions are probable.

### > Lack of Massage Table

Additionally, when working in health care environments such as a hospital, hospice or nursing home, massage therapy is most often performed while the client/patient is lying in bed or perhaps sitting in a chair, *not on a massage table*. So, when considering a health care work setting, know that you'll have to be **flexible** and willing to **adjust** to a variety of different situations, some anticipated and some unexpected.

### PATIENT VS. CLIENT

In most other work settings, you're going to have clients who you market your practice to. The health care setting is a little different in that many of the people you work with are going to be patients, like in a hospital or hospice, for example, or residents, say, in a nursing home.

The difference might seem subtle, but with it come myriad implications for massage therapists considering health care environments, one of the biggest being that many times the *patient* you see in a health care setting is sick, or perhaps even dying—meaning you're going to have to learn how to manage your emotional responses. (Learn more about the importance of emotional resilience and self-care in the “What’s Expected of You” section on page 6.)

Massage therapists working in health care settings will also find that contraindications are much more common than in other work environments. Working with patients dealing with illness, recovering from injury, struggling with addiction or living in a nursing home makes understanding when a technique is contraindicated of critical importance.

### SCHEDULE AND EXPECTATIONS

When you own your own practice or work in a spa, you can expect a schedule that is fairly regular and predictable. In health care work settings, schedules are often much more random, sometimes even chaotic. Massage therapists will have to work around the patient's schedule and accommodate interruptions from medical staff or visiting family members, for example. You might also find the patient isn't available when you go to see them, so may have to make several attempts before actually getting to work with the individual.

Also, the actual massage therapy sessions are often different in health care environments, even though the goals—such as stress relief, pain management and increased well-being—are similar to other practice settings. For example, some patients in the hospital or hospice environment might only want a few minutes of massage therapy, and the pressure they're able to tolerate might be significantly lighter than consumers in other work settings. The intake process will be of critical importance. The key is to follow and respect what the patient finds most beneficial, whether that's five minutes of hand massage or 30 minutes of back massage.

One of the benefits of health care settings is you won't have to be in charge of basic business functions, such as scheduling clients, as many times your services will be referred by medical staff.

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## Questions to Consider:

Can I handle working in a hectic environment? Do I want a regular, predictable schedule or can I adjust to having one that is more random? Am I emotionally prepared to work with patients who are sick or injured?

# WHAT'S EXPECTED OF YOU

**Ability to Work Collaboratively:** In most health care environments, massage therapists are going to be part of a larger team, making strong interpersonal skills necessary for success. As well as working with medical staff such as physicians and nurses, you might also work alongside other complementary and alternative medicine practitioners. For example, in an integrative health care setting, you may find massage therapy is paired with other therapies, such as guided imagery, aromatherapy and reflexology. In this way, being cross-trained in multiple techniques can be helpful so you have a deeper understanding of other therapies being offered to patients.

## COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Because you'll be working with so many different people, in a system that is most often hierarchical, **superior communication skills** are imperative. Not just verbal, either, as in health care settings such as hospitals, you're going to be expected to document or chart the work you do with a patient. You might also find the intake procedure varies across differing health care environments, so you need to familiarize yourself with the procedures of the specific work setting you choose.

## EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

The clinical nature of the environment, coupled with the fact that you'll be working with patients who are sick, sometimes with grave or terminal illnesses, requires you really think about how you'll handle health care settings. Across the board, the patients you see in health care environments are going to be different than consumers who might seek massage for stress relief or relaxation. In short, health care environments aren't going to be for everyone, and deciding that for yourself isn't a bad thing.

As noted previously, many patients in these work settings use massage for similar reasons, but their *personal circumstances* will almost always be different. In a hospice, massage to reduce anxiety may mean you'll need to be emotionally prepared to work with individuals who are facing the end of their life. Or, if you work in a hospital, the people you see might be sick, sometimes critically ill, and pain management to recover from illness

or surgery may be different in scale than in private practice.

When thinking of working in a health care environment, asking yourself a couple of simple questions might give you a better idea of whether or not these settings suit you and your abilities: Do you think you can work with people in medical settings without taking the work home with you at night? Can you walk into a hospital room and work with someone who is ill without bursting into tears?

## SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

There is knowledge you should have or be prepared to attain if you decide to pursue work in health care environments.

If you are going to work with a very specific population, say in a nursing home, be ready to explain any education you have concerning massage therapy for the elderly when applying for these positions. Similarly, if you know you want to work with cancer patients, take some continuing education courses that reflect this interest and the most up-to-date research on the topic (AMTA offers courses on cancer and massage, online at [amtamassage.org/learn](http://amtamassage.org/learn)).

In these work settings, you're also going to want to have a basic understanding of common conditions and symptoms, as well as a solid knowledge of medications and their massage considerations.

You should note, too, that massage therapy's scope of practice is particularly important in health care environments, and perhaps becomes even more stringent in some, if not all, work settings. For example,

recommendations for additional services or techniques you might not think twice about in other work settings with relaxation-focused clients cannot be made so freely in health care environments. One reason is because in many health care environments the people you work on will be under the care of a physician. So before mentioning any additional therapies or work to patients, you must first make sure what you're recommending doesn't contradict the physician's treatment plan or the work of hospital staff.

### WORK SETTING ETIQUETTE

You're always professional, no matter the work setting you choose to practice massage therapy. In health care environments, however, professional etiquette extends beyond how you behave when you are with the person receiving massage therapy because you're working alongside other professionals and, in many cases, family members of the patient.

Some situations are straightforward and performed in every work setting you consider, such as knocking before entering the room where a patient or client is awaiting a massage therapy session. Other situations are specific to health care work settings, and can be more subtle, like understanding that when a curtain is pulled, hospital staff are usually performing care on the patient and you should wait *outside the room*.

Similarly, when working in a hospital or nursing home, for example, the patient's doctor may visit the room during your

massage session. You shouldn't ever assume it's okay for you to continue massaging the patient or even stay in the room, and instead ask if you should step out. The same is true when family members visit.

The name of the game in health care environments is *flexibility*, so if these types of interruptions are going to rattle you, think hard before deciding to pursue work in a health care environment.

### EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Massage therapists considering a career in health care environments have a great deal of opportunity in terms of education. A variety of AMTA online courses exist—such as geriatric massage—that will help you gain the skills you'll need to work in specific health care environments. You might also look to your local chapter for education events that speak to your interest in health care environments, as well as the programming at AMTA National Conventions.

The increasing demand for massage therapists in health care settings has also led to the development of advanced educational opportunities. The University of Michigan, the University of Minnesota and the Oncology Training Conference offered by the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston are a few examples of some current programs that focus on advanced training.

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## Questions to Consider:

Does a health care work setting fit my personal and professional goals? **Am I qualified to work in health care environments?** Will I be able to manage the emotional demands of a health care work setting? **Does my personality lend itself well to being part of a team and working collaboratively with a number of different people?**

# BENEFITS & WAGES

## AVERAGE INDUSTRY WAGES

The average hourly rate for massage therapists working in a health care setting is \$45.91.

## OTHER WORKPLACE SETTINGS (excluding tips)<sup>1S</sup>

## AVERAGE HOURLY PAY

Spa/Salon Setting:	39.18
Hospital/Medical Office or Clinic:	45.33
Chiropractic Office or Integrated Clinic:	41.64
Health Club/Athletic Facility:	46.49

## WAGES

Wages across health care environments are likely to vary, and will vary depending on if you're part-time. In some well-established clinical settings, massage therapists may very well find a full-time position, though there are also many health care environments that may need you on a part-time basis.

Many health care environments are going to pay you an hourly wage. Again, however, you may be able to find a salaried position if, for example, you live in an area where a hospital has an established, successful massage therapy or integrative health care program. Although massage therapy in health care environments is trending up, full-time, salaried positions are not currently the norm in many areas of the country.

## BENEFITS

As with wages, the availability of benefits such as health insurance are going to vary across the health care work settings. Programs that are well-established and successful are more likely to offer benefits, but that is not yet the norm. For perspective, AMTA's *Massage Profession Research Report* showed 37 percent of massage therapists received benefits from their employer in 2015.

## YOUR EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Depending on the health care environment, you may be hired as an employee or as an independent contractor. There are pros and cons to both.

There is no single definition of who qualifies as an independent contractor. Instead, the determination is made on a case-by-case basis. For federal taxes, the Internal Revenue Service applies a 20-part test, looking at factors that help establish whether the independent contractor or the business owner has control over the work. Labor officials in many states look at those 20 factors. This 20-part test is one way—but not the only way—the IRS and many state agencies try to determine who controls the work. Some factors include how the employee receives instructions from the business regarding when, where and how to perform the work; how the training is provided; and which party sets the hours of work. Fines and back taxes owed when a worker is misclassified can be significant.<sup>2</sup> Since classification standards can change, you may want to consult an accountant or business attorney for more information. And be sure to research which option—working as an employee or a contractor—works best for you and your current and future career goals.





# CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

## CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

As more and more consumers understand the benefits of massage therapy, opportunities for massage therapists continue to rise—especially in health care environments. According to AMTA's *2015 Consumer Survey*, **52 percent** of massage consumers had their last massage for medical reasons. Furthermore, a full **91 percent** of Americans believe that massage therapy can be effective in reducing pain, with **90 percent** considering massage therapy beneficial to health and wellness.

Add to AMTA's research what the Bureau of Labor Statistics<sup>3</sup> reports about the outlook for the massage therapy profession: "Demand for massage services will grow as the baby-boom generation seeks these services as a way to help maintain their health as they age. Older people in nursing homes or assisted-living facilities also are finding benefits from massage, such as increased energy levels and reduced health problems. Demand for massage therapy should grow among older age groups because they increasingly are enjoying longer, more active lives."

There's also evidence that suggests massage therapists are more frequently receiving referrals from health care practitioners, with **71 percent** of massage therapists reporting they received referrals from chiropractors and integrated health clinics in the *2015 Industry Survey*. Additionally, **55 percent** of massage therapists reported receiving a referral from hospitals and medical offices.

Combined, massage therapists have good reason to be optimistic about the opportunities opening up in health care environments.

## Questions to Consider:

What is my ultimate career goal in the massage therapy profession? **Do I want to work as an independent contractor or look for a work setting that will hire me as an employee?**

Can I build relationships with health care practitioners who will refer patients to me?

# EMPLOYMENT OUTLOOK

## OUTLOOK FOR THE MESSAGE THERAPY PROFESSION

**Employment opportunities are expected to grow for massage therapists.** According to the most recent U.S. Department of Labor information, **employment opportunities for massage therapists are expected to grow at a much faster than average rate** as more people become interested in alternative medicine and holistic healing. It's estimated that between 2012 and 2022, massage therapists are likely to see a 23 percent increase in job opportunities as more people learn about the benefits of massage therapy.<sup>3</sup>

## HEALTH CARE AND MESSAGE THERAPY

Between 2012 and 2020, the health care industry is expected to grow at a quick pace, adding 5 million jobs. For perspective: **In 1998, only 7.7 percent of hospitals were offering complementary and alternative therapies. By 2011, that number had risen to 42 percent.**

Who's driving growth? In many cases, it's consumers and patient populations in varying health care environments that are asking for complementary and integrative therapies like massage therapy. For example, results from the Health Forum Survey of Hospitals<sup>4</sup> conducted by the American Hospital Association shows the No. 1 criteria a hospital uses to select a complementary and integrative therapy is patient demand.

According to the same study, the top three reasons for massage therapy being used in the hospital environment are pain management, cancer, as well as pregnancy, making knowledge in these specific areas of massage therapy particularly valuable in some health care settings. Additionally, massage therapy was the top complementary therapy provided on an outpatient basis, second only to pet therapy in an inpatient setting.

## A CHANGE IN HEALTH CARE

Increase in demand for massage therapy is also being driven by the skyrocketing costs of health care, as well as the millions of baby boomers who are now reaching ages where chronic conditions become more evident.

The population of people 65 and older is projected to increase from 40.2 million in 2010 to 54.8 million in 2020. This age group will account for 16.1 percent of the population in 2020, up from 13 percent in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

They're going to expect from health care what they've expected from every other service: personalized care directed toward maintaining wellness instead of simply restoring health. Complementary and integrative medicine is playing a part in this effort, with more than 70 percent of baby boomers responding they've used some form of complementary or alternative medicine when asked in an American Hospital Association survey.



#### **MASSAGE THERAPY TRENDS IN HEALTH CARE:**

**MAJOR HEALTH SYSTEMS THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES** are incorporating CIM therapies, including massage therapy, into treatment plans for patients. For example, Duke Integrative Medicine, Mayo Clinic's Complementary and Integrative Medicine Program and Northwestern Memorial Hospital all offer massage therapy to a variety of patient groups.

Regardless of setting, however, nearly all massage therapists saw an increase in referrals from health care practitioners. **Sixteen percent of consumers discussed massage therapy with their doctor** or health care provider in 2015, and of these consumers, **54 percent received referrals from their physicians.**

# IN THEIR WORDS

## WORKING IN A WELLNESS CLINIC

### WORKING AS A MASSAGE

**THERAPIST** at Luther Hospital in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, part of the Mayo Health Systems, Tanya Scherf sees a variety of people in the health care setting, ranging from neurology and oncology to trauma and pediatric patients. Here she shares her own experience and gives massage therapists an idea of what's needed to work in a health care setting.

### Q. WHAT SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES OR TYPES OF EDUCATION HELPED YOU SUCCEED?

**A.** Having a bachelor's degree was instrumental in helping me get the program started four years ago. Our institution values a four-year degree, and I had to convince medical staff I had the education and skills needed to care for patients. Strong knowledge of anatomy and physiology is imperative as well, and massage therapists are going to need to know how massage might affect someone in an acute setting. Many times I'm working on clients and have to watch monitors, too, and I have knowledge of disease states, medications and medical terminology that is indispensable.

As for getting started, I spent *five years* convincing departments of the value of massage therapy, and because a hospital department isn't reimbursed by insurance, money was a factor. Networking with other employees in the departments I want to work was instrumental in my success. I made a point of getting to know the nursing staff and physical therapy staff.

### Q. WHAT SKILLS WERE YOU EXPECTED TO HAVE?

**A.** You need to graduate from an *accredited school* and *pursue continuing education* courses that are relevant to the health care setting, such as cancer massage, pregnancy massage or neuromuscular therapy, for example.

### Q. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE WORKING IN A HEALTH CARE SETTING?

**A.** It's very different than working in a spa or salon, as I need to be constantly aware of my surroundings when I'm working on patients. I am always using my knowledge of the body and the patient's medical condition to make smart decisions when working on them.

### Q. WHAT CHALLENGES ARE INVOLVED?

**A.** I may have to work around multiple tubes, IVs and machines, and many times a patient isn't in a position that's ergonomically desirable for me. The patient's condition can also be challenging, as I may work with someone who has wounds that don't look or smell very good, for example. Or perhaps the patient isn't conscious or is dying. Many times, it's hard for a patient to completely relax in the hospital setting, and it's important to not try to force them into relaxation if they're not able.

### Q. WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST?

**A.** I love the variability and the anticipation of change. Most of all, I love working with a population that truly greatly benefits from massage therapy. I have seen patients that come in for routine surgeries that should be discharged but can't go home because their pain isn't under control. I can't tell you how many times I've been able to relieve pain, calm someone or put someone to sleep when no other method worked.

### Q. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER MESSAGE THERAPISTS THINKING OF A HEALTH CARE SETTING?

**A.** Spend time shadowing someone first, as a health care setting is not going to be for everyone. Be sure you have a strong grasp of anatomy, physiology, medical terminology and pharmacology, and really think about how comfortable you'll be in an environment that is fast-paced and changes quickly.

## WORKING WITH CARDIAC & ONCOLOGY PATIENTS

**PAT GRIMM WAS AN ADVANCED PRACTICE NURSE FOR MANY YEARS BEFORE BECOMING A MASSAGE THERAPIST,** so was familiar with patients experiencing emotional distress related to illness and/or hospitalization. After finishing massage therapy school, she learned the community hospital was initiating a massage therapy program for post-cardiac and post-orthopedic surgery patients. One year later, she joined the team.

### **Q. WHAT SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES OR TYPES OF EDUCATION HELPED YOU SUCCEED?**

**A.** My nursing background, with its knowledge of health care delivery institutions has obviously been invaluable. However, this is not a requirement for successful massage practice in a health care setting. Prior to working in the hospital setting with either the cardiac or oncology patients, I was required to attend in-service education programs on cardiac surgery, oncology and massage, and gentle massage for the frail. All of these provided practical experience with massage techniques appropriate to individuals experiencing illnesses and their treatment.

### **Q. WHAT SKILLS WERE YOU EXPECTED TO HAVE?**

**A.** I was expected to be at least two years out of massage therapy school, meaning I had to have experience as a practicing massage therapist. I also needed a beginning working knowledge of the disease states of these patients, and the typical treatments for cardiac disease, cardiac surgery, cancer, types of cancer, radiation and chemotherapy. Knowledge of the protocols for communicating with nurses and physicians, introducing massage to patients and documentation of massage sessions was also part of the orientation to the hospital setting.

### **Q. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE WORKING WITH CARDIAC AND ONCOLOGY PATIENTS?**

**A.** In two words: challenging and rewarding. The challenges include the need to be very attentive to the physical and emotional state of each individual patient, as well as to the response of the patient to massage. Too much of a good thing may be too much physically for an ill or post-surgery patient. The rewards are immeasurable. Seeing and feeling your patient relax and fall into restorative sleep, relief of pain and muscle tension, and even seeing worried family members relax from just watching you work.

### **Q. WHAT CHALLENGES ARE INVOLVED?**

**A.** Massage, as a health care intervention, may need to be explained to the health care team. Developing good communication and relationships with others on the health care team, particularly the nurses, is essential. As a nurse, I know the nursing staff want what is best for their patients, have a great deal of responsibility for their care and can be protective of them. Anyone else entering the realm of patient care must be knowledgeable and trustworthy, which means you are going to need to be well-educated regarding the patient population you massage.

### **Q. WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER MASSAGE THERAPISTS THINKING OF A HEALTH CARE SETTING?**

**A.** Talk to therapists who are currently practicing in a health care setting. Find out what is required in terms of education and licensure. Visit the setting, and assess your own comfort with what you hear, see, smell and sense. Hospitals and out-patient clinics can sometimes be frightening if you haven't spent much time in them. Identify what would be involved in that setting. What is required in terms of orientation? Are their in-service programs available or required?

# RESOURCES

## AMTA ONLINE CAREER GUIDANCE

Whether you are a seasoned massage therapist or just starting your career, AMTA's Online Career Guidance section offers a wealth of resources to expand or jump-start your career, including a special section for massage therapists choosing to work in a health care setting, a career path assessment quiz and other installments of the AMTA Career Success Series.

[amtamassage.org/careerguidance](http://amtamassage.org/careerguidance)



## ONLINE COURSES

AMTA's online courses are a convenient way to earn your CEs and enhance your knowledge. More than 60 courses are currently available, including many highlighting current research on massage therapy for specific health conditions you may encounter, including sciatica, fibromyalgia, cancer and more.

[amtamassage.org/learn](http://amtamassage.org/learn)

## AMTA NATIONAL CONVENTION

Network with colleagues and advance your skill set at this annual event. Access continuing education courses focusing on hands-on learning as well as the business-side of the profession, including collaboration and communication in health care.

[amtamassage.org/education](http://amtamassage.org/education)

## AMTA JOB BANK

Visit AMTA's Job Bank to search for massage therapy employers in your area, including health care opportunities. Or, post your resume to gain exposure to potential employers.

[amtamassage.org/jobbank](http://amtamassage.org/jobbank)



## AMTA'S MENTORING PROGRAM

Because of the differences for massage therapy in health care environments compared to other work settings, massage therapists considering this career option might want to volunteer or take part in an internship program sometime during their decision process. Make connections through AMTA's Mentoring Program.

[amtamassage.org/mentoring](http://amtamassage.org/mentoring)

## FURTHER READING

1. The Value and Efficacy of Massage Therapy in Integrated Health Care  
[amtamassage.org/healthcare](http://amtamassage.org/healthcare)
2. AMTA Member Guide: Emerging Health Care Opportunities  
[amtamassage.org/healthcare](http://amtamassage.org/healthcare)
3. "The Hospital Environment," *Massage Therapy Journal*, Winter 2010  
[amtamassage.org/mtj](http://amtamassage.org/mtj)
4. "A Touch of Compassion," *Massage Therapy Journal*, Winter 2011 [amtamassage.org/mtj](http://amtamassage.org/mtj)
5. "Massage + Hospice," *Massage Therapy Journal*, Fall 2012 [amtamassage.org/mtj](http://amtamassage.org/mtj)
6. "Massage and the Medically Fragile Client," *Massage Therapy Journal*, Spring 2016  
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1. 2015 AMTA Consumer and Industry surveys
2. Simmons, C. (2009, Spring). Classified Information. *Massage Therapy Journal*, 43–45.
3. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*
4. *Health Forum Survey of Hospitals*, American Hospital Association, 2011

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## ABOUT THE AMERICAN MASSAGE THERAPY ASSOCIATION

The American Massage Therapy Association, the most respected name in massage therapy, is the largest non-profit, professional association serving massage therapists, massage students and massage schools. The association is directed by volunteer leadership and fosters ongoing, direct member-involvement through its 51 chapters. AMTA works to advance the profession through ethics and standards, the promotion of fair and consistent licensing of massage therapists in all states, and public education on the benefits of massage.

More information/ join:  
[amtamassage.org](http://amtamassage.org)



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