

# Good Vibrations

## TODAY'S BEST MASSAGE-THERAPY PRODUCTS

- ◆ Hand-holds ◆ Cushions ◆ Pillows
- ◆ Chairs ◆ Foot-and-Calf ◆ Foot Baths

Sometimes just getting along in today's high-stress times can leave you in a world of hurt. A bevy of massage products promises to ease your aches. However, experts say that massage devices should be used with caution—a warning that often is lost in the marketing push—because it *is* possible to get too much of a good thing.

By Molly M. Ginty

**S**tress grips every inch of your body. Your forehead is furrowed, your feet have gone pffffff and you yearn for something that will melt away your anxiety.

You are not alone. American Pain Foundation says pain affects 76 million Americans. You feel it most commonly in the form of backaches, headaches and neck pain—all of which can be triggered or exacerbated by stress.

Relax. Since we last reported on personal-therapy products in 2005, massage equipment gives you more ways than ever before to soothe those jangling nerves. Massage chairs now boast new motions and deep-tissue kneading, and more models use body



scanning that customizes massage to an individual's needs. The use of air-bag technology in chairs and foot-and-calf massagers has been improved and become more widespread. Massage cushions that you used to have to strap onto a chair have become more versatile too. You now can find cushions that double as floor massage mats.

If that sounds good for what ails you, you should know that the market also has changed in the past 5 years. Companies have consolidated or disappeared, which means fewer choices for you. But at least one manufacturer sees a silver lining: Cliff Levin, who is president of Inada Massage Chairs, says the recession

has sunk many low-quality brands, which means that it's harder to find bad equipment. And the fewer things that you have to worry about, the better.

More good news: Blair Hayes, who runs Elite Massage Chairs, says fewer choices haven't led to higher prices for massage chairs. Prices are about the same as they were 3 years ago, and he expects that trend to continue at least through 2012.

**ONLY HUMAN.** Although massage-therapy experts with whom we spoke insist that no machine can replace the human touch, massage chairs, which are at the top of the massage-products

food chain, better mimic human massage than did models from 5 years ago. The chairs' improved touch, manufacturers say, is a result of research into the motions of professional massage therapists. Manufacturers even put sensors on therapists' hands to track the moves that they make. The manufacturers then try to replicate those moves mechanically when they design the rollers, air bags and massage nodes that are in their chairs.

Massage therapists long have said the benefit that consumers gain from hands-on massage is about more than just soothing sore spots: Massages also provide relaxation and improved circu-

## ✓ Best Buys in Personal-Therapy Products

### Best Buy Categories

- [P]=Premium selection
- [M]=Midrange selection
- [E]=Economy selection



SEE PAGE 72

Best Buys in personal-therapy products were selected based on ease and comfort of operation, ranges of use and warranty. Massage chairs and cushions also were rated on total massage surface area and stroke length, features and massage programs. Dimensions for massage chairs measure the chair in the upright position.

*Cushions* cover the seat and back of a chair, or a similar area, such as in a mat. *Pillows* are devices that can work only one body part, such as the neck or back, and must be moved to use on different body parts.

All Best Buy hand-held massagers and all Best Buy sound ma-

chines have a 1-yr. warranty.

*Best Price* is a reflection of the lowest retail price that was available at press time and is subject to change.

### HAND-HELD MASSAGERS

#### [P] Jeanie Rub Pro-3402

MSRP: \$280; Best Price: \$163

>>The Pro-3402—a repeat Best Buy selection—has variable oscillating speeds that range from 1,400 to 4,600 rpms, which is at least 1,500 rpms more at the top of the range than other hand-held massagers provide. This means that you can control the massager's speed more accurately than you can with others (slowing for sensitive spots or speeding up to dig into tight major muscles). It is the only model that we found that lets you add three attachments (\$17.65 to \$44) that focus on specific areas. Other models' attachments don't have

that attention to detail.

#### Features:

- \* Speeds: Variable
- \* Cord: 13-ft.
- \* Weight: 6.9 lbs.

#### [M] Brookstone Max2

MSRP: \$200; Best Price: \$200

>>The Max2 has two pulsing nodes—competitors have only one—that you can press into tense spots or acupressure points, which supposedly relieve overall tension when you massage them. This device delivers up to 2,500 rpms of vibration; others that are in this price range top out at 1,000 rpms. This model has five speeds—others have two—and three separate programs that add up to eight different massage variations.

#### Features:

- \* Speeds: 5
- \* Cord: 12-ft.
- \* Weight: 6.0 lbs.

#### [E] Brookstone Spot Personal Massager

MSRP: \$50; Best Price: \$30

>>The Spot is just 10 inches long, which means that it easily can fit into a purse or satchel—portability that's rare among hand-held massagers. Its three speeds are rare among models that are in this price range. We like this model's unique contoured design, which allows you to use it lengthwise on large areas (such as tired thighs) or

#### HoMedics MCS-360H



at its rounded end to home in on smaller spots (such as a stubborn knot that is in your neck).

#### Features:

- \* Speeds: 3
- \* Cord: None
- \* Weight: 1.7 lbs.

### MASSAGE CUSHIONS

#### [M] HoMedics MCS-360H

MSRP: \$100; Best Price: \$100

>>This new model's Swedish and shiatsu massage modes are the most vigorous and penetrating of any cushion that we found. It also delivers a more realistic rub-down than what we found in other cushions because of its four massage nodes that change position beneath the backrest. The model's combination of heat and three settings is rare at this price.

#### Features:

- \* Settings: 3
- \* Cord: 11-ft., 8-in.
- \* Weight: 10.7 lbs.
- \* Warranty: 2-yr.



Jeanie Rub Pro-3402

lation. (University of Miami researchers report that a hand massage results in a 53 percent drop in levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which triggers the “fight-or-flight” response to stress that elevates blood pressure and sets the heart racing.)

*Air-bag technology*, in which motors inflate and deflate air bags to squeeze sore muscles, seeks to accomplish the same goals by using the air bags’ squeezing capability to imitate the kneading that is created by human hands. Air-bag technology now is found in chairs and foot-and-calf massagers that are in all price ranges.

Manufacturers say the number of air

bags and their position determine how human your massage feels. “Add too few air bags or air cells, and you basically have a blood-pressure cuff,” Levin says. But there is no magic number of air bags that does the trick. How well the bags work also depends on your size, shape and weight.

Air-bag technology isn’t the only method that manufacturers use to give you a better massage. A few massage chairs include new motion patterns in their roller mechanisms. (In contrast to air bags, roller-style mechanisms rely on kneading and vibration.) The latest mechanisms move in figure-eight patterns or use swiveling motions instead

of just moving up and down, as older models did. You’ll find this type of motion in products that are made by multiple manufacturers for as little as \$60 in massage pillows or as little as \$600 in massage chairs.

The kind of strokes that the rollers apply to your muscles also has changed. Today’s massage chairs and cushions give you the ability to program a broader range of stroke styles than ever before. You now can find more chairs and cushions that employ deep-tissue and trigger-point massage in addition to Swedish and shiatsu. *Deep-tissue massage* uses slow, forceful rolling to target muscle and connective tissue, and to re-



Elite Optima

**[E] HoMedics Outdoor Massaging Body Roll**

MSRP: \$40; Best Price: \$36

>>What makes this lightweight mat, which can be used on furniture or on the floor, stand out are two unique features: Its roll-up, battery-operated design allows you to fold this model and carry it by a handy strap, and its fabric, which not only is washable but also is mildew-, water- and sun-resistant, makes this model suited for outdoor use.

**Features:**

- \* Settings: 2
- \* Cord: None
- \* Weight: 2.6 lbs.
- \* Warranty: 1-yr.

**MASSAGE PILLOWS**

**[E] Sharper Image Deluxe Shiatsu**

MSRP: \$60; Best Price: \$50

>>This pillow has kneading capability that you’d have to pay twice the price to find in another model. No

other pillow has this model’s compact size (15 inches by 10 inches) and ability to mimic human touch. Its four massage heads have both shiatsu and vibration settings and work with or without heat. Most pillows that are in this price range have only simple vibration.

**Features:**

- \* Settings: 2
- \* Cord: 11-ft., 8-in.
- \* Weight: 6.3 lbs.
- \* Warranty: 1-yr.

**MASSAGE CHAIRS**

**[P] Elite Optima**

MSRP: \$3,495; Best Price: \$3,295

>>A combination of features makes the Optima a winner. This model can accommodate users who weigh up to 300 pounds—15 pounds more than what any other chair that we found can handle. It has 9-inch leg rests; others have leg rests that extend 4 to 5 inches. We also like this model’s rare music function:

It will sync its massage motions to your favorite tunes if you plug in your portable media player, phone or CD player to the chair’s pillow speaker via an audio jack.

**Features:**

- \* Dimensions: 32 in. (w) x 46 in. (d) x 47 in. (h)
- \* Settings: 9
- \* Weight: 243 lbs.
- \* Warranty: 5-yr.

**[M] Panasonic EP-MS40**

MSRP: \$2,500; Best Price: \$2,500

>>The EP-MS40 has a combination of features that are unmatched for the price: a fold-out ottoman, which tucks seamlessly under the seat; washable upholstery; and removable cushions. Unlike others that are in this price range, this chair has a slim massage block mechanism, which, when combined with kneading nodes that push 2-3/8 inches out of the mechanism’s surface, allow this chair to maintain its trim appearance.

**Features:**

- \* Dimensions: 27-1/2 in. (w) x 42-1/2 in. (d) x 33-1/2 in. (h)
- \* Settings: 6 (2 manual)
- \* Weight: 104 lbs.
- \* Warranty: 3-yr.

**[E] Inada CUBE FML-3000A**

MSRP: \$800; Best Price: \$800

>> We found that the CUBE FML-3000A’s mechanics deliver a superior massage among chairs that

are in this price range. Unlike any other chair that is on the market, this model folds into a 19-inch-by-22-inch-by-19-inch rectangle that you can store or use as a shelf or a footrest.

**Features:**

- \* Dimensions: 19 in. (w) x 39 in. (d) x 27 in. (h)
- \* Settings: 4
- \* Weight: 49 lbs.
- \* Warranty: 1-yr.

**FOOT-AND-CALF MASSAGERS**

**[M] Brookstone i-need**

MSRP: \$200; Best Price: \$180

>>The i-need stands out because it combines the rolling action of a shiatsu massager, and the squeezing and releasing air-pressure action that you typically find in a high-end massage chair. This massager has a wider range of speeds and pressure intensities than do others that are in this price range.

**Features:**

- \* Settings: 3
- \* Warranty: 1-yr.

(Continued on page 28)



Brookstone i-need

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SEE PAGE 72

(Continued from page 27)

### FOOT BATHS

#### [M] HoMedics PedicureSpa Salon

MSRP: \$60; Best Price: \$40

>>Other foot baths don't have the PedicureSpa Salon's inserts, which provide gentle massage. This device is quieter than others are and also has a one-of-a-kind handle for no-splash carrying and emptying. And no other foot bath comes with this model's accessories—a dry heel re-

ducer, nail brush, nail buffer and two pumice stones—which treat your feet to a professional-grade pedicure.

#### Features:

\* Cord: None

\* Warranty: 1-yr.

### SOUND MACHINES

#### [M] HoMedics Sound Spa Fusion SS-6510

MSRP: \$60; Best Price: \$60

>>You would have to pay at least \$40 more to find another sound machine that includes an iPod/iPhone dock. That means that you can listen (and, because it also is an alarm clock, wake up) to your favorite music in addition to six sound settings. An included cable

lets you plug in other personal media and CD players.

#### Features:

\* Sounds: Six

#### [M] Marpac SleepMate/Sound Screen580A

MSRP: \$50; Best Price: \$41

>>This device produces only white noise, but its unique design—a cap that has eight air holes and a collar that has seven air vents—allows you to create 56 tone and volume variations. We found that this model is the most effective device at masking a range of noises, from indoor conversation to outdoor traffic. The **980A** (\$60), which has dual-speed settings that effectively double the



HoMedics PedicureSpa Salon

number of tones, is also a Best Buy.

#### Features:

\* Sound: White noise

For more information on the above Best Buys, contact the manufacturers directly. See page 68.

pair damage; *trigger-point massage* focuses on sensitive or tight areas that can form in your muscles.

Of course, the best massage that you'll get is from a product that can be tailored to your body type. Happily, more chairs today use infrared technology to measure your height and width and determine the curve of your spine. The chairs pinpoint where *acupressure points* (believed to generate health benefits when they are massaged) fall on a body of your size and position the rollers for a custom massage.

You can expect to pay \$2,500 for a chair that can deliver a custom-made massage, compared with \$3,000 5 years ago. Premium models that cost at least \$5,500 further refine customization. These chairs can calculate your weight, so you receive less forceful movements if you're thin or more forceful ones if you're heavy. We found those claims to be true in chairs that we evaluated. And you typically can override this function if, say, you are petite and still want a vigorous massage.

Consequently, manufacturers say mechanical massage now delivers the same benefits as that of a hands-on rub-down. But only limited studies on those claims have been conducted, and manufacturers say the results of their research are proprietary, so they wouldn't share the data with us.

Massage therapists, unsurprisingly,

say that hands-on massage is superior to that of massage machines. Dr. Dennis E. Minotti II, who is an assistant professor at Osteopathic Research Center at University of North Texas Health Science Center, agrees. He expects that massage devices' movement and vibration will continue to improve, but he says any mechanical device can't match the human hand. Devices "lack the dexterity and nearly infinite amount of adjustment for angle and pressure that the human hand can achieve," he says.

**DOSE OF CAUTION.** Whatever your size or shape, believe it or not, over-indulging your massage habits either intentionally or by accident can cause problems. For instance, you could damage tissue if you put too much pressure on it, says Kristen Sykora, who is a massage therapist and chairperson of the New York chapter of American Massage Therapy Association. The trade group represents more than 57,000 massage therapists. (Of course, Sykora says, those dangers also apply to a too-forceful human massage.)

Most massage devices—no matter what their type—typically cap their programs at 20 minutes, and you should resist the temptation to press "start" again or use the manual function to continue the massage. Sykora suggests that you limit first-time use to 5 minutes to become familiar with the device and

then maximize your time at 10 minutes per day for smaller devices and 1 hour per day for massage chairs.

When we ran those suggestions by massage-therapy-products manufacturers, we drew mixed responses. Some manufacturers agreed that the advice was sound; others said how long you indulge in a massage makes no difference. We believe that it's best to err on the side of caution when you use massage-therapy products and follow Sykora's suggestions on time limits.

It might feel heavenly to receive a massage, but it also should be beneficial. Experts tell us that even the mildest of massage—human or machine-made—might cause problems, particularly if you have arthritis, blood clots, bone fractures, burns, cancer, open wounds or osteoporosis, or if you are pregnant. If you have any of these conditions, ask your doctor if you should avoid massage of any kind or limit it to certain types or specific areas of the body. (For example, proponents of alternative medicine say shoulder massages are fine for pregnant women, but lower-back massages could harm the fetus.)

In other words, don't roll the dice when it comes to rattling your bones. ●

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