

BEAUTY

What You Need to Know Before You Give It a Go

It's not unusual for novices to feel a little apprehensive about trying massage. "Someone you don't know is going to see you naked, so it's completely natural to feel a bit inhibited at first," says Victoria Gardner, L.M.T. of Spa Bavu. If you're new to massage, there are plenty of ways to ease into the experience. "Start with a treatment that allows you to leave your clothes on, like a chair massage, reflexology or Shiatsu," suggests Betteye Odom of Bettye O. "Once you're ready for a more traditional massage, choose a half-hour instead of an hour-long massage, or request that you be massaged only from the waist up," says Odom. "The parts of your body that are not being worked on are draped, so you're never fully exposed on the table."

The purpose of a massage is to help you relax, so if at any time you feel a chill or simply wish to be covered up more, just ask. If you want to leave your panties on, by all means do so. It's all about being comfortable. And if you have specific ailments, make sure you communicate that to your therapist, says Jason Turner, L.M.T. of Divine Touch in South Hampton, New York, and New York City. If you happen to get a therapist who's chatty, just let him or her know up front that you plan on sleeping. "This usually nips the excessive talking in the bud," Turner adds.

Another fantastic way to warm up to massage is to throw an at-home spa party for you and your girlfriends and to invite a licensed therapist. Turner, who has been doing this for years, works along with an aesthetician and manicurist who will provide their professional services in the comfort of your own home. "The group rates usually end up being much more cost-effective than if you had a treatment at a spa," he adds.

Prices for massages vary depending on where you live and on the length of the session. As for tipping, between 15 and 20 percent of total services is generally acceptable. Expect to reserve your appointment with a credit card. Also understand that most spas have a 24-hour cancellation policy, so give notice as soon as possible if you need to make any changes. Finally, do arrive early. You may have to fill out some paperwork, or you might want to enjoy a cup of tea before you're transported into the comfort zone. In general, anyone with a medical condition, chronic illness or injury should get clearance from a physician before proceeding with any form of massage. The same goes for pregnant women.



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Let Your Fingers Do the Walking

Our four-star guide to the best places to lay your head

1. Avon Salon & Spa Offerings include a 50-minute foot reflexology treatment that finishes off with a neck and shoulder massage. **Price range:** \$98–\$130. **Location:** New York. **Contact:** (212) 755-AVON.

2. The Spa at Mandarin Oriental Hotel, New York Get to this luxury spa, elevated 35 feet off the ground, at least 45 minutes early to take in the ethereal views of Central Park and start destressing with some "me" time in the water relaxation room. **Price range:** \$190–\$380. **Location:** New York. **Contact:** (212) 805-8880.

3. The Spa at Norwich Inn What could be better than a romantic country getaway to a 1929 colonial inn with your sweetie? The answer: a massage upon arrival to kick things up a notch. **Price range:** \$65–\$150. **Location:** Norwich, Connecticut. **Contact:** (800) ASK-4SPA.

4. Soul Day Spa and Salon Lawyer-turned-spa owner Nicole M. Cober set out to make a difference when she opened Soul a year ago. The spa offers one of a few Vichy showers in Washington, D.C., and Cober offers scholarship funds to Howard University (her alma mater) students and pampering days for members of a local women's shelter. Mission accomplished. **Price range:** \$40–\$80. **Location:** Washington, D.C. **Contact:** (202) 986-SOUL.

5. Diva's Day Spa This haven has it all: calming decor, friendly staff and stone massage. **Price range:** \$35–\$85. **Location:** Fort Lauderdale, Florida. **Contact:** (954) 771-9SPA.

6. Ten Thousand Waves Rather than resting on a bed enclosed by four cold walls, guests at this Japanese-influenced spa can choose to receive treatment in a pagoda, or a treetop Japanese group room (a semiprivate room separated by shoji screens), or a waterfall tub (called a "natural spring in the woods").