

# Reflexology: Therapeutic foot manipulation

[Internal Medicine News, April 1, 2002](#) by [Nancy Walsh](#)

\* Reflexology is a therapeutic practice involving the application of pressure to the feet in an attempt to alleviate symptoms elsewhere in the body.

\* Few objective data support reflexology, but many patients report benefits including pain relief

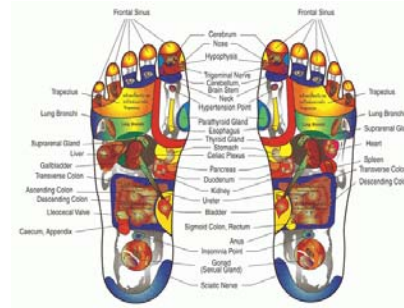
## History of Use

The ancient Egyptians, Chinese, and Native Americans all apparently practiced various types of therapeutic foot manipulation. The earliest record of foot massage is a wall painting in a tomb at Saqqara, Egypt, believed to date from approximately 2330 B.C.

The contemporary practice of reflexology in which manipulation of specific areas of the feet is thought to have therapeutic benefits on different areas of the body, is credited to Dr. William H. Fitzgerald of the ear, nose, and throat department of St. Francis Hospital in Hartford, Conn. He termed the practice "zone therapy," coauthoring a text of the same name that was published in 1917.

In Dr. Fitzgerald's conceptualization, the body was divided into 10 vertical zones; organs within the different zones corresponded to analogous "reflex zones" on the feet. For example, the thoracic and abdominal organs and structures relate to the zones occupied by the five metatarsal bones.

For reasons that are unclear, reflexology is today the most popular form of alternative medicine in Denmark, and it is



generally more popular in Europe than in the United States. Its practice is not regulated, although many professional organizations exist. The Reflexology Association of America has published standards of practice and a code of ethics. The association officially defines reflexology as "a science based on the premise that there are zones and reflex areas in the feet and hands which correspond to all glands, organs, parts, and systems of the body. The physical act of applying specific pressure using the thumb, finger, and hand techniques to these reflex areas results in the reduction of stress that promotes physiological changes in the body"

## Clinical Studies

Dr. Adrian White of the department of complementary medicine, University of Exeter (England), offered a different perspective. "The idea that organs are represented on the soles of the feet seems fanciful to orthodox trained scientists, since there is no known anatomical or physiological pathway for this representation.

... Of course, reflexology might have a useful clinical effect, even if its 'representative zones' basis is not correct: Massage of tender areas in the feet could have generalized health benefits. Patients report favorable effects of reflexology and it must be a safe therapy Further studies are certainly warranted."

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