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BACKGROUND: The effectiveness of massage therapy for low-back pain has not been documented. This randomized controlled trial compared comprehensive massage therapy (soft-tissue manipulation, remedial exercise and posture education), 2 components of massage therapy and placebo in the treatment of subacute (between 1 week and 8 months) low-back pain. **METHODS:** Subjects with subacute low-back pain were randomly assigned to 1 of 4 groups: comprehensive massage therapy (n = 25), soft-tissue manipulation only (n = 25), remedial exercise with posture education only (n = 22) or a placebo of sham laser therapy (n = 26). Each subject received 6 treatments within approximately 1 month. Outcome measures obtained at baseline, after treatment and at 1-month follow-up consisted of the Roland Disability Questionnaire (RDQ), the McGill Pain Questionnaire (PPI and PRI), the State Anxiety Index and the Modified Schober test (lumbar range of motion). **RESULTS:** Of the 107 subjects who passed screening, 98 (92%) completed post-treatment tests and 91 (85%) completed follow-up tests. Statistically significant differences were noted after treatment and at follow-up. The comprehensive massage therapy group had improved function (mean RDQ score 1.54 v. 2.86-6.5, p < 0.001), less intense pain (mean PPI score 0.42 v. 1.18-1.75, p < 0.001) and a decrease in the quality of pain (mean PRI score 2.29 v. 4.55-7.71, p = 0.006) compared with the other 3 groups. Clinical significance was evident for the comprehensive massage therapy group and the soft-tissue manipulation group on the measure of function. At 1-month follow-up 63% of subjects in the comprehensive massage therapy group reported no pain as compared with 27% of the soft-tissue manipulation group, 14% of the remedial exercise group and 0% of the sham laser therapy group. **INTERPRETATION:** Patients with subacute low-back pain were shown to benefit from massage therapy, as regulated by the College of Massage Therapists of Ontario and delivered by experienced massage therapists.