

Hand reflexology is an effective and deeply relaxing therapy. Teresa Rich, ATL, MICHT, explains its history, benefits and uses

Our hands are of the utmost importance when it comes to touching, sensing and communicating with others. Perhaps this is why they have such a powerful role in the healing process, whether they are providing a treatment – or indeed, receiving one.

Hand reflexology is a very simple yet effective therapy that most clients find pleasant and deeply relaxing. Although some consider it to be the poor relation of foot reflexology, hand reflexology is often more convenient and can be just as effective as its sister therapy.

History and principles

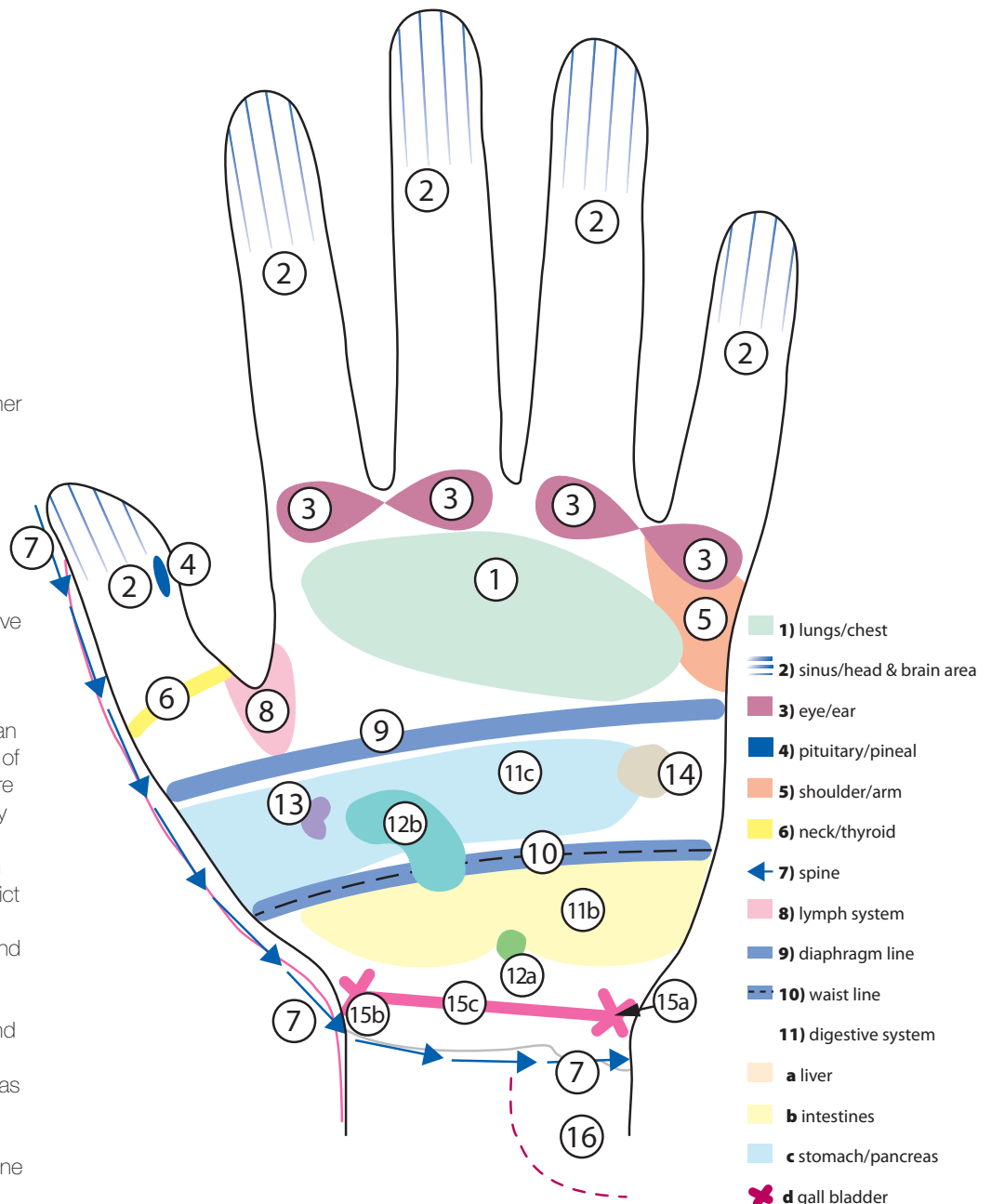
Many reflexology books make reference to an ancient Egyptian painting found in the tomb of Ankhmahor at Saqqara that depicts pressure being applied to the hands and feet in a way that looks similar to reflexology as we know and practise it today. If this picture was from the tomb in question and does actually depict reflexology in its earliest form, this would indicate that the therapy is more than four and a half millennia old.

Ancient Chinese writings also allude to a pressure therapy that involves the fingers and thumbs, as well as wringing or rubbing the hands together in order to benefit the body as a whole.

However, it wasn't until the 1920s that Dr William Fitzgerald wrote a book about 'zone therapy', explaining how the body is divided into 10 vertical zones, which run from the top of the head to the tips of the toes and fingers.

All of the organs and structures that fall within the same zone are believed to be linked by a flow of energy and can be 'accessed' or rebalanced by applying pressure to specific points on the feet or hands where their relevant zone terminates – a theory Eunice Ingham went on to develop in greater detail in the 1930s.

Why foot reflexology became more popular than hand reflexology remains unclear. However, Eunice states in her first book, 'Stories the feet can tell...', 'Reflexes exist in our hands in the same proportion,



location, and so on, as in our feet. Only it is more difficult to locate them for they are not so pronounced and the added amount of exercise we give our hands keeps the tenderness worked out, which would otherwise be found.'

It is true that the reflexes are much deeper in the hands and therefore more pressure is required in order to produce the same results as foot reflexology. However, if a gentler treatment is desirable for a particular client, then hand reflexology may be more preferable to foot reflexology as it is generally considered less powerful.

What the treatment involves

When preparing for a hand reflexology session, the therapist should remember that comfort is essential.

Hand reflexology should be carried out on a soft but firm surface. This could be a covered pillow or a folded towel, whichever the therapist and clients prefer.

Ideally, the client should be sitting back in a recliner chair with a hand resting on a pillow or towel placed on the armrest. The therapist would then sit diagonally opposite the client in another chair, on the corresponding side being treated.

your fingertips

Stories the hands can tell

An examination of the hands' appearance can reveal quite a lot about the health, age and lifestyle of an individual. The quality of the fingernails, in particular, can be viewed as a window to health. Vertical ridges come with ageing, but horizontal ridges may result from disease or infection, taking certain drugs while the nails are forming, or trauma.

The colour and appearance of the nails may indicate liver problems, kidney disorders, diabetes, anaemia, circulation problems, conditions affecting the lungs, fungal infections and even exposure to toxins.

As touch is a vital part of the treatment, it is important that the therapist takes good care of their hands. Treat them to a regular soak in warm olive oil with a few drops of peppermint essential oil (if not contraindicated). Always ensure that your nails are kept short and smooth at the edges and moisturise your hands daily.

The benefits

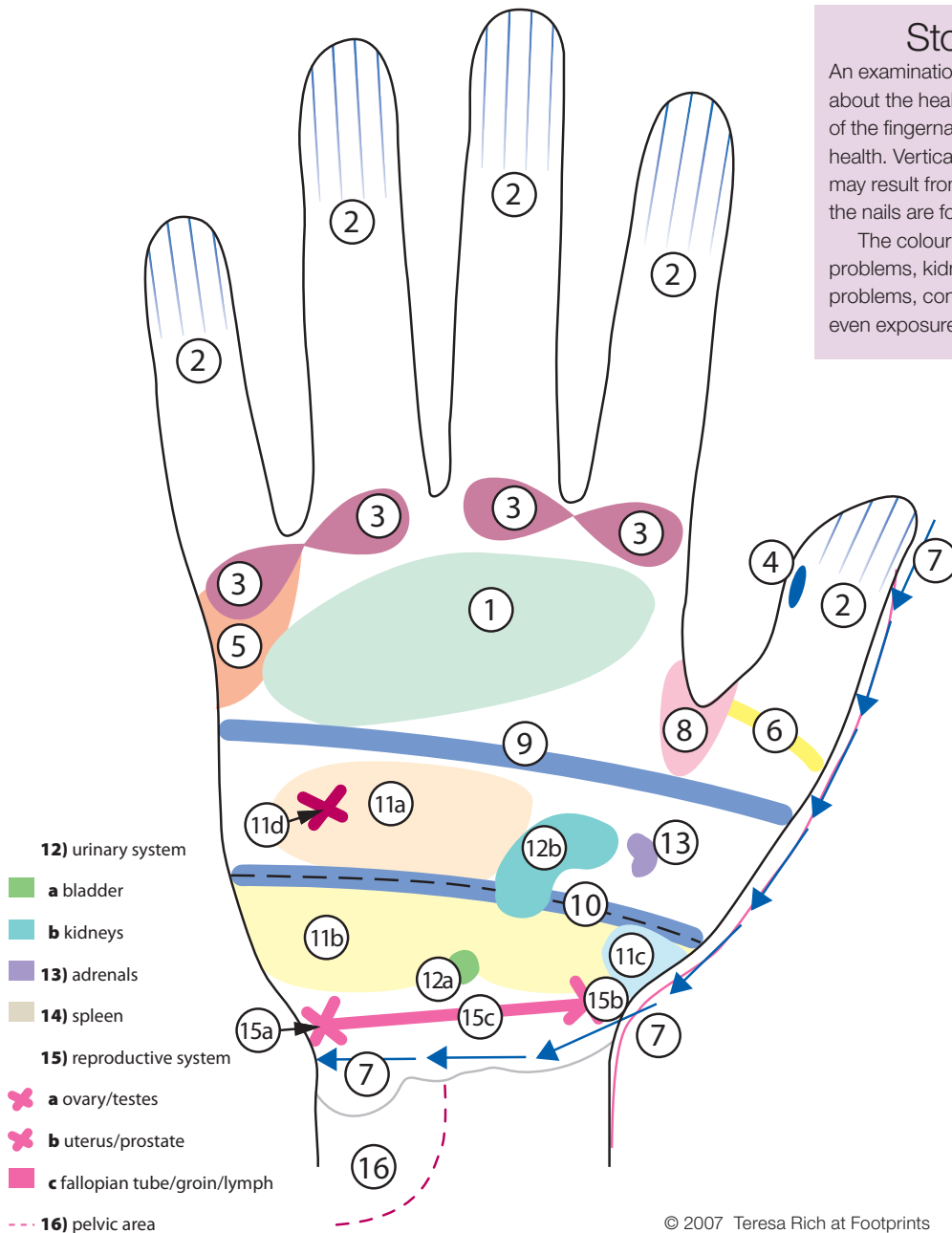
As with many complementary therapies, most clients report that their health has improved either specifically or generally from treatment, yet there is currently little scientific research available to either verify or refute the many benefits associated with hand reflexology. As well as improving circulation and well-being, the therapy is said to:

- Benefit conditions that typically affect the hands and wrists, including arthritis, carpal tunnel syndrome and RSI;
- Aid recovery from hand injury;
- Help maintain manual dexterity;
- Rejuvenate overused or tired hands.

Many reflexologists have also found that hand reflexology is particularly useful if the client has an injured foot, an infection – such as athlete's foot – ticklish feet, or does not like their feet being touched, or is generally uncomfortable with touch. It is found that most people can cope with having their hands touched as this is a common occurrence in everyday life.

Reflexologists who are presented with a local contraindication on the foot, such as an ingrown toe nail, or who want to reinforce their work on a particular reflex found on the foot, may find it useful to work the corresponding reflexes on the hand towards the end of their treatment.

It is also much easier to provide clients with some home care advice that involves working reflex points on the hands as opposed to the feet, as the latter are obviously much harder to reach, particularly



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Therefore, the therapist should sit to the client's right hand side when working the right hand, and on the client's left hand side when working the left hand. However, the therapist and client may find it more comfortable to sit opposite one another, with the client resting their arms on a table placed in the middle.

A treatment typically begins with a five-minute massage of the right hand, which includes effleurage, wrist rotations, thumb rotations and knuckle kneading. This is then followed by a 25-minute reflexology routine, where the therapist works the following:

- The neurological system/skeletal system/muscular system;
- Head;
- Arm and shoulder;
- Spine;
- Pelvic area;
- Cardiovascular/lymphatic system;
- Digestive system, liver, gall bladder;
- Reproductive system;
- Urinary system;
- Endocrine system.

The treatment is then concluded with a five-minute massage routine and all of the above is repeated on the left hand.

Holistic | Hand reflexology

if the client is elderly or disabled.

An added bonus of hand reflexology is that it enhances hand awareness in clients, helping them to protect their hands from future injury – which could be of paramount importance to those who use their hands for a living, e.g. musicians, computer operators, and dare I say, therapists!

As most people use their hands to some extent in their professional lives as well as their personal lives, it could be argued that anyone and everyone can benefit from using hand reflexology on a 'preventative medicine' basis.

Contraindications to treatment

The list below covers just some of the contraindications to a hand reflexology treatment, and medical advice should be sought where appropriate:

- Unstable blood pressure;
- Liver disorder;
- Recent surgery;
- Cuts or abrasions;
- Fractures or sprains;
- Diabetes;
- Epilepsy;
- Infections;
- Skin allergy problems;
- Under the influence of drugs/alcohol;
- Medication by the doctor.

If the client is pregnant, the pituitary should not be worked and most books recommend that hand and foot reflexology should be avoided during the first trimester. If the client has any heart problems, treatment should ideally commence on the hands – with GP approval – as treatment via the feet may be too strong. The hands are also a powerful aid in normalising palpitations.



Ann first came to me in 1997 through a recommendation by another client. She is a retired lady with osteoarthritis throughout her body and especially in her hands.

History

As a result of her condition, Ann was finding it extremely difficult and painful to carry out everyday activities that involved her hands, such as opening jars and putting on clothes, and she often had to rely on others for help.

At her initial consultation, Ann was evidently distressed by the pain she was experiencing as a result of her condition. On examination, her hands appeared deformed, inflamed and stiff, and their colour indicated that she had poor circulation. Due to the arthritis she was also experiencing pain in her hips, knees, shoulders and feet.

At the time, Ann was taking several anti-inflammatory drugs for pain relief, but the dose has been gradually reduced since she has been having regular hand reflexology treatments. Her initial treatment plan involved weekly hand reflexology, followed by monthly appointments.

Aftercare

Ann continues with daily hand exercises, consisting of squeezing a ball in the palm of her hands, pressing her fingers together and rotating her wrists. She follows a very healthy diet, drinks lots of water and tries to avoid foods that antagonise her arthritis. In between treatments she uses a TENS machine and soaks her hands in Dead Sea salts. Whenever the pain returns, she increases her hand reflexology treatments to once a week.

Current health status

Over the years, the arthritic pain has become more manageable and Ann has experienced episodes where her hands have been pain-free. She has regained the use of her hands and this has given her more independence as she no longer relies heavily on others for support. Ann is now a very happy lady with a positive outlook on life.

Hand reflexology products from FHT

The FHT Members' Catalogue offers two products to support members who are learning hand reflexology: a training DVD by Teresa Rich, which covers the full hand reflexology sequence and other material, and also reflexology gloves. These clearly display the reflex points and their corresponding organs/body systems.

For more information or to place an order, visit our catalogue website at www.fhtonline.co.uk or call 02380 624350 and select option 2.

Hand reflexology gloves: code RHG £9.99

Hand reflexology DVD: code TRHRD £22

Postage and packaging charges will apply.



Hand reflexology seminars

Teresa Rich will be giving two introductory one-day seminars on hand reflexology for FHT in York on 29 March and Leicester on 17 April. For more information, please see page 10. For details about other reflexology seminars, refer to your Education Programme 2008 or visit www.fht.org.uk/education&events/seminars

Reference

1. Ingham, Eunice D. (1938) *Stories the feet can tell thru' reflexology and stories the feet have told thru' reflexology: the original works of Eunice D Ingham.* Ingham Publishing, Inc. Revised by Dwight Byers (1984). ISBN: 0-9611804-3-9. Available from FHT. Tel: 02380 624350 or visit www.fhtonline.co.uk



Teresa Rich, ATL, MIGHT, is the founder of Footprints, providing advanced reflexology treatments, training and DVDs in hand and foot reflexology. Tel: 01202 295910 or visit www.teresarich-therapy.co.uk

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