



Natural Health Practitioners of Canada  
Praticiens de la Santé Naturelle du Canada

## POSITION STATEMENT

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# **Appropriate Professional Touch and Guidelines for Treatment of Sensitive Areas of the Body**

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**Appropriate Professional Touch**



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The massage therapist must employ appropriate touch with therapeutic intent and contact only. It is the therapist's responsibility to demonstrate knowledge of appropriate touch, restrict touch within treatment to therapeutic contact, avoid accidental or incidental physical contact, and be knowledgeable of ways to address perceived inappropriate contact (Inter-Jurisdictional Practice Competencies and Performance Indicators for Massage Therapists at Entry-to-Practice, 2016, 1.3, h, i,)

Massage therapists are not permitted to touch in any way the genitals, anus, or nipple/areola of a client (applicable to all genders). Touching these areas is considered sexual misconduct. The NHPC Code of Ethics states that members must maintain appropriate boundaries with a client and refrain from initiating or engaging in any sexual conduct, any sexual activities, or any sexual behaviour involving a client.

Penetration of the genitals or anus by the therapist is outside the scope of practice for all forms of massage therapy, and under no circumstances is it justified as clinical practice or within the domain of a massage therapy practice. Only regulated health professionals are authorized to perform these controlled/restricted activities, given that they are appropriate for the profession's scope of practice as mandated in each province's respective legislative acts for regulated health professionals.

## **Guidelines for Treatment of Sensitive Areas**

Massage therapists may be asked to treat areas of the body that are considered sensitive; for example, the chest wall muscles, breast, gluteal region, upper inner thigh, anterior pelvic region, and groin area. Touching these areas poses a potential risk for misinterpretation and/or misunderstanding and may be perceived by the client as a violation of their body and possibly as sexual misconduct. Because of this potential risk, the NHPC advises its members of the following standards when treating sensitive areas. Following these standards will help ensure that the client understands and consents to the treatment of sensitive areas and mitigates the likelihood of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the intent of the therapist.

Massage therapists should be aware of and sensitive to the fact that clients may have other "sensitive" body areas, in addition to the ones listed above, that are unique to the client's particular experience, gender, age, culture, and possible history of sexual abuse.

Massage therapists must ensure that they meet the following standards when treating sensitive areas of the body:

**A. The treatment must be clinically indicated.**

- Ensure that you have the knowledge, skills and training to perform massage for the clinical indications for treating sensitive areas of the body prior to performing the massage. If you do not possess these, you should refer the client to a massage therapist who can competently perform the massage.
- To determine whether treatment of a sensitive area is indicated, the massage therapist should:
  - Obtain informed consent for assessment of the sensitive area.
  - Identify client treatment goals.
  - Identify whether treatment of the sensitive area is clinically indicated and relevant to the treatment goals identified by the client.
  - Obtain and document a thorough health history, review health history with client, conduct an assessment of the sensitive area verifying client consent and comfort throughout.
  - Review the assessment findings with the client and document them in the health record.
  - Review and describe the risks and benefits associated with the treatment.
  - Provide the client with the option of a treatment plan that includes treatment of the sensitive area and another option where treatment of the sensitive area is avoided.

**B. Draping of the client's sensitive areas is discussed prior to treatment and proper draping is used.**

- To ensure proper draping of sensitive areas, massage therapists must:
  - Provide secure draping technique options to the client to facilitate the utmost sense of comfort and safety, including the option to work through a clothing or sheet barrier (where possible).
  - Describe the draping process to the client prior to and throughout treatment, as appropriate.
  - Verify client comfort and consent throughout the entire process, as appropriate.
  - Make adjustments according to client needs when required.
  - Apply clearly identifiable and secure draping of the sensitive area so that the client can properly distinguish areas where touch will be applied and where it will not.
  - Ensure that drape boundaries properly protect the client from exposure of the genital area and the gluteal cleft without exception.
  - Provide for the sensitive area to remain covered and securely draped at all times other than when it is necessary for direct assessment or treatment application.
  - Ensure that when bilateral exposure is required (for some treatment techniques), the therapist must discuss with the client prior to obtaining informed consent.

- Never reach underneath the draping.

**C. The treatment must be discussed with the client and informed consent must be obtained and documented in the client's clinical record.**

- Treatment of sensitive areas must be discussed with the client in advance, and prior verbal informed consent must be obtained and recorded in the client's treatment notes each time the treatment is delivered. Therapists may also choose to obtain signed written consent when treating sensitive body areas as an added measure to mitigate the likelihood that the therapist's intent will be misinterpreted as sexual misconduct. While the NHPC recommends getting signed written consent, it is not a requirement. Documenting verbal consent in the treatment record is sufficient.
- Informed consent must be voluntary and include discussion about the:
  - nature and purpose of the treatment of the sensitive area
  - expected benefits, risks, and side effects of the treatment
  - alternative courses of action
  - consequences of not having the treatment
  - draping and positioning
  - client's right to ask questions and withdraw consent at any time
- During the course of a massage session, if the therapist determines that massage to a sensitive body area is clinically indicated, but informed consent has not been previously obtained to touch this area, the therapist should not attempt to get consent to treat the area in question while the client is on the massage table. The client is not in an optimal state (i.e., fully clothed and in an upright position) to make an informed decision. Instead, the therapist should bring this forward to a subsequent appointment when the client is in a better position to consider whether or not to give consent to have the area treated.
- When treatment plans have been met, treatment of the sensitive area should be discontinued.
- When a condition does not respond to a proposed treatment plan, the massage therapist should discontinue the plan and refer the client to an appropriate health care provider.