

The Massage Therapy Pressure Scale  
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**1**  
Light Lotioning



**2**  
Heavy Lotioning



**3**  
Medium Pressure



**4**  
Strong Pressure



**5**  
Deep Pressure



From Walton, T. Medical Conditions and Massage Therapy: A Decision Tree Approach. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

From Walton, T. *Medical Conditions and Massage Therapy: A Decision Tree Approach*. Philadelphia: Wolters Kluwer Health/Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2011. Visit [www.thepoint.lww.com/walton](http://www.thepoint.lww.com/walton) for more info or to order an examination copy.

**TABLE 2-1. FEATURES OF THE FIVE MASSAGE PRESSURE LEVELS**

<b>Pressure Level 1: Light Lotioning</b>	
Tissues displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slight skin movement only</li> </ul>
Therapist body use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little hand strength needed, just for contouring</li> <li>• Use of arms and hands; little upper extremity strength required; no leaning body mechanics required</li> </ul>
Common uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applying and spreading massage lubricant</li> <li>• Maximum pressure for clients who are severely medically frail, with highly unstable tissues</li> </ul>
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slow speed is required to monitor this pressure level</li> <li>• Tendency to go too lightly at this level can result in incomplete hand contact; full, firm contact is important to maintain, taking the shape of the client's tissues</li> </ul>
<b>Pressure Level 2: Heavy Lotioning</b>	
Tissues displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slight movement of superficial adipose tissue and muscle</li> </ul>
Therapist body use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Little hand strength needed, just for contouring</li> <li>• Use of arms and hands; little upper extremity strength required; no leaning body mechanics required</li> </ul>
Common uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distributing massage lubricant evenly; rubbing in excess</li> <li>• Introducing the therapist's hands to the body at beginning of session</li> <li>• Maximum pressure for most medically frail clients</li> </ul>
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyday use of this pressure: rubbing in lotion or sunscreen</li> <li>• Tendency to go too lightly at this level can result in incomplete hand contact; full, firm contact is important to maintain, taking the shape of the client's tissues</li> </ul>
<b>Pressure Level 3: Medium Pressure</b>	
Tissues displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some movement of medium layers of adipose tissue, muscle, and blood vessels</li> <li>• Slight movement of adjacent joints may occur with this pressure; for example, neck may rotate a few degrees when pressure is applied in strokes along shoulder</li> </ul>
Therapist body use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upper body and upper extremity strength or good body mechanics (transfer of therapist's body weight into tissues) necessary to achieve this pressure</li> <li>• Some hand strength is necessary for kneading at this pressure</li> </ul>
Common uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In healthy populations, used to warm up the tissues and prepare them for deeper pressures or more focused work</li> <li>• Maximum pressure for some clients who are experiencing illness, but are mobile and can participate in some activities of daily living</li> </ul>
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often used as an "everyday" pressure by practitioners of many modalities, especially in effleurage and petrissage</li> <li>• Effleurage and petrissage at this pressure (and higher) have traditionally been believed and intended to increase circulation</li> </ul>
<b>Pressure Level 4: Strong Pressure</b>	
Tissues displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Movement of deep layers of adipose tissue, muscle, blood vessels, fascia</li> <li>• Movement of adjacent joints is noticeable with this pressure; for example, hips rotate and thighs roll during hip massage, and significant depression (1–2in.) of the scapula occurs when upper trapezius is pressed inferiorly at this pressure</li> </ul>
Therapist body use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Substantial upper body strength and good body mechanics (transfer of therapist's body weight into tissues) necessary to deliver this pressure with full hand</li> <li>• Substantial hand strength is necessary for kneading</li> <li>• Therapists commonly switch to fingertips, knuckles, forearms, or elbows to apply pressure with less effort</li> </ul>
Common uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequently used in practice with healthy clients to relax tension in medium and deep layers of muscle</li> <li>• Used to release restrictions in connective tissue</li> </ul>
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often used by therapists describing their work as deep tissue or deep muscle therapy</li> <li>• Along with levels 3 and 5, effleurage and petrissage at level 4 have traditionally been believed and intended to increase circulation</li> </ul>

(continued)

**TABLE 2-1. FEATURES OF THE FIVE MASSAGE PRESSURE LEVELS (Continued)****Pressure Level 5: Deep Pressure**

Tissues displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Movement of deepest layers of adipose tissue, muscle, blood vessels, fascia</li><li>• Through compressed soft tissue, therapist engages the bones of the massage site with the bones of therapist's hand (or elbow, forearm, or other massage surface), and the two move as a unit</li></ul>
Therapist body use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Significant upper body strength and excellent body mechanics (transfer of therapist's body weight into tissues) necessary to deliver this pressure with full hand</li><li>• Often one hand must be braced with the other hand to deliver this pressure</li><li>• Therapists commonly switch to knuckles, forearms, or elbows to apply pressure with less effort</li></ul>
Common uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Used with healthy, robust clients preferring the deepest pressure</li><li>• Used to address deep restrictions in soft tissue</li></ul>
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Often used by therapists describing their work as deep tissue or deep muscle therapy, structural work, deep transverse friction, or mobilization of soft tissue</li><li>• Along with levels 3 and 4, effleurage and petrissage at this pressure have traditionally been believed and intended to increase circulation</li></ul>