

Contraindications and cautions to be exercised in reflexology

The list below represents conditions and situations that may occur. A rationale is provided. To ensure that all practitioners work within their limitations, all areas must be covered as part of their initial training and an assessment made of their understanding of this area.

Condition	Contraindication	Caution	Teaching point	Rationale
Acute undiagnosed pain		✓	✓	It is recommended that a client should then be referred to their GP for a medical diagnosis of their condition. Clients are unlikely to attend with extreme pain – if it develops during treatment, first aid training and emergency procedure applies.
Aids/HIV and hepatitis		✓	✓	These conditions should be covered during initial training, which offers the practitioner an understanding of how reflexology can help such a client and when caution should be considered. Follow standard reflexology hygiene procedure.
Aneurism – if known		✓	✓	Reflexology improves circulation.
Arthritis with inflammation or pain		✓	✓	Guidance during training to use appropriate pressure – this will accommodate client's needs.
Cancer – including blood and bone cancer		✓	✓	Understand the medical treatment and the likely reactions of treatment in relation to pressure. Awareness of low platelet count and potential bruising is important. Working with people with cancer: It is recommended that practitioners undertake further training prior to treating in this sector to optimise support for the patient.
Cellulitis	✓ Severe cases	✓	✓	Be aware of the amount of pressure used, as direct pressure on affected area is likely to be painful and therefore not appropriate. In severe cases it may be impossible to work the affected area at all. Using hand reflexology avoids contraindication.
Contagious or notifiable disease	✓		✓	Any risk of infection and cross-infection makes this a contraindication.
Diabetes		✓	✓	Appropriate pressure should be used as client's healing potential may be impaired, have lessened sensitivity (peripheral neuropathy), finer skin, bruise easily or be prone to ulceration on legs and feet. A treatment using lighter pressure will be of benefit to diabetics and accommodate all of the points mentioned. Gangrene is contraindicated – obtain immediate medical attention.
Drugs or alcohol abuse – patient out of control or their mental state appears to be unstable	✓ If lacking the skills and facilities to cope		✓	If a client presents for treatment under the influence, there may be a risk to the safety of the practitioner. If a client who is dependent on alcohol or other substance (or is recovering) presents for treatment and is not under the influence then the practitioner should be able to proceed with caution. Practitioner would be wise to arrange support or clinical supervision and undertake appropriate training. Risk of severe reaction/healing response. Alcoholic seizure may occur.
Epilepsy		✓	✓	Have an understanding of the condition and how to assist and prevent injury in the event of a seizure – this should be part of regular first aid training.
Imminent medical tests or procedures	✓ Depends on the test	✓	✓	Depends on the type of test being carried out and whether the client is having reflexology for the first time immediately before the tests are being carried out – the results might not be representative and overview may be distorted by the improvements resulting from reflexology treatment.
Injury to the feet		✓	✓	Practitioners should have been trained to adapt to all types of clients to accommodate their needs. Use hand reflexology or avoid affected area.
Heart condition, un stabilised		✓	✓	If a client is unstable then they are probably under the care of the hospital. Treatment during this time would only be possible with consent, adequate supervision and the emergency facilities to hand.
Medication		✓	✓	When, for a serious condition the benefits resulting from reflexology might alter the amount of medication required, treatment should be carried out with the cooperation of the prescribing doctor.
Menstruation		✓	✓	Some practitioners may choose to treat more cautiously if a client is prone to heavier flow or the reflex areas are tender, however reflexology can help such a client.
Osteoporosis		✓	✓	Be aware of the fragility of a client's bones and that a lighter pressure may be more appropriate.
Phlebitis		✓	✓	Be aware of the amount of pressure used – direct pressure on affected area is likely to be painful and therefore not appropriate. In severe cases it may be impossible to work affected area, though unlikely on the feet – use hand reflexology.
Surgery		✓	✓	Before surgery. Practitioner could inform clients that a treatment may provoke a healing response – especially with first treatment or patients who are very sick. OR treatment can help to prepare for surgery – calming effect. After surgery: Treatment can be very helpful post-operatively once signed off or with permission from the surgeon.
Pregnancy		✓	✓	Practitioners should remember two lives are involved! Some practitioners may choose to avoid treatment. Some clients claim reflexology has helped during their entire pregnancy. Fear of litigation is often the deciding factor. Working with clients who are pregnant: It is recommended that practitioners undertake further training to optimise support for the patient.
Thrombosis/DVT – If known* <small>(*Frequently patients do not know they have a DVT, and treatment often takes place with practitioner and client unaware of the fact)</small>	✓	✓	✓	Reflexology improves circulation. When the client is stabilised proceed with caution. After flying: Check for signs of thrombosis, in some cases clients may prefer to defer treatment.
Thyroidism, hyper and hypo			✓	Client's medication may need to be adjusted in cooperation with their GP.
Varicose veins, severe		✓	✓	Skin may be delicate, direct pressure on affected area should be avoided.
Verrucae		✓	✓	Area should be covered or avoided and client referred for treatment.

Remember it is an offence for therapists and practitioners to advertise that they treat the following:

Diabetes, Tuberculosis, Cataracts, Glaucoma, Bright's Disease (nephritis), Epilepsy, Paralysis, Locomotor Ataxy (one result of Tertiary syphilis) or Cancer.
One way of ensuring safe practice is to keep skills current. Ensure CPD hours are maintained or exceeded.