

Massage: the truth

Rob Hicks

WHILE there's no denying that a massage is a great non-drug therapy, and can help cyclists with sore, tight muscles, there is very little science indicating the benefits of it. Without this backing, many sceptics have questioned the actual positives that can be gained from a sports massage. That is, however, until now.

According to a new study, which was conducted by researchers from Manchester University, physiological changes occur in the muscles during a massage and biomechanical sensors that are triggered send inflammation-reducing signals to the muscle cells. The researchers also discovered that a 10-minute massage could help chronic conditions such as arthritis and muscular dystrophy.

In addition, massage sends signals to the muscles to build more mitochondria, the power centres of cells that play an important role in healing.

The study followed 11 men in their 20s and instructed them to cycle for more than 70 minutes, to the point of exhaustion. This was followed by a 10-minute rest. In these 10 minutes, a massage therapist performed a massage on one leg.

Muscle biopsies were conducted on both legs, and repeated two and a half hours later. The researchers found that inflammation reduced in only the massaged leg.

Although the research is still in its infancy, these results do suggest that massage therapy blunts muscle pain by the same biological mechanisms as most pain medications and could be an effective alternative to them.

"The main thing, and what is novel about our study is that no one has ever looked inside the muscle to see what

is happening with the massage," says Justin Crane, a doctoral student in the Department of Kinesiology at McMaster.

"We have shown that the muscle senses that it is being stretched, and this appears to reduce the cells. As a consequence, massage may be beneficial in terms of recovery from injury.

"I didn't think that little bit of massage could produce that remarkable a change, especially since the exercise was so robust. Seventy minutes of exercise compared to 10 minutes of massage; it is clearly potent."

