

How to choose a massage therapist

How remedial differs from relaxation, what private health actually covers, and what a treatment should and should not feel like

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Two businesses can both say "massage" and be selling completely different things: one is a therapeutic treatment for a specific problem, the other is an hour of being looked after. The price, the insurance cover and the qualification requirements are all different, and the word on the sign does not distinguish them.

What it should cost

Relaxation massage is usually charged per hour at a rate that reflects the setting - a day spa charges more than a small clinic for comparable hands-on time. Remedial massage is often charged similarly but includes assessment, which means the first appointment is usually longer and more expensive.

Private health insurance often covers remedial massage but not relaxation massage, and usually only where the therapist is a recognised provider with a qualifying association and a provider number. Check the specific requirement before assuming you can claim.

Ask about the cancellation policy, because massage has a high no-show rate and many clinics charge the full fee for a late cancellation.

What the law requires

Massage therapy is not a licensed profession in Australia, so qualifications are voluntary in the legal sense and vary widely. Health fund recognition is the practical standard: a therapist with a provider number has met a qualification and association requirement that an unaffiliated one has not.

Therapists should hold public liability and professional indemnity insurance. Ask, particularly for remedial work where an injury is possible.

Remedial treatment involving assessment or manipulation of the spine should be approached carefully, and a therapist who finds something outside their scope should refer you on rather than treat it.

Red flags

No assessment before a remedial treatment.

Being told to endure sharp pain, or that pain is how you know it is working.

Claims that massage can treat a condition that requires medical diagnosis.

No insurance, when asked.

A therapist who cannot explain what they are doing and why.

What good looks like

They ask what the problem is and assess before treating.

They explain what they found and what the treatment will do about it.

They check in on pressure and adjust.

They tell you what to expect afterwards, including soreness.

They refer you on when something is outside what they should treat.

What to ask

- "Is this remedial or relaxation, and which is right for what I described?"
- "What qualification do you hold, and do you have a health fund provider number?"
- "Can I claim this on my private health extras?"
- "Will you assess me before treating, and will you explain what you found?"
- "How much discomfort is normal, and what should I tell you to stop?"
- "What is the cancellation policy?"

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