What happens inside a shockwave therapy session

Understanding shockwave therapy before your first appointment

Shockwave therapy, also known as extracorporeal shockwave therapy (ESWT), is a non-surgical treatment that uses acoustic waves to stimulate healing in soft tissues and bones. Originally developed for breaking kidney stones, the technology was adapted for musculoskeletal medicine and is now used to address chronic pain, tendon injuries, and stubborn conditions like plantar fasciitis, tennis elbow, and shoulder impingement. The idea behind the therapy is that the mechanical energy from the shockwaves triggers a biological response in the body, encouraging blood flow, cell repair, and the release of growth factors.

If you are considering this treatment, you likely want to know what the experience actually feels like, how many sessions are needed, and what kind of results are realistic. While every clinic may follow its own protocol, the general structure of a shockwave treatment session is fairly standard. Knowing what to expect can help you feel more prepared and less anxious about the unknown.

The initial consultation and clinical assessment

Before any machine is switched on, a practitioner will sit down with you to discuss your medical history, your current pain or injury, and your goals for treatment. This is called a clinical assessment. During this conversation, they will ask about the duration of your symptoms, any previous treatments you have tried, and your general health. This is also the time to mention any contraindications, such as pregnancy, active cancer, or recent surgery in the area, as these may affect whether shockwave therapy is safe or appropriate for you.

The practitioner will then perform a physical examination to locate the exact source of pain or dysfunction. They may ask you to move the affected joint or limb in specific ways to see how it responds. This part of the session helps them decide where to aim the shockwave applicator and what treatment intensity to use. A good clinical assessment is important because shockwave therapy works best when the acoustic waves reach the right tissue depth and angle.

What happens during the treatment itself

Once the assessment is complete, you will be asked to sit or lie down in a comfortable position that allows the practitioner easy access to the treatment area. A coupling gel is applied to the skin. This gel is not just a lubricant; it helps transmit the shockwaves from the device into your body without losing energy to the air. Without it, the treatment would be far less effective and could cause skin discomfort.

The practitioner then places the handheld applicator against the gel-coated skin and begins delivering pulses. The feeling is often described as a quick tap or a mild thump, similar to a rubber band snapping against the skin. Some people find the sensation odd at first but get used to it within a minute or two. The treatment intensity can be adjusted during the session. Lower intensities feel gentler, while higher settings produce a deeper, more percussive sensation. The practitioner will usually start at a lower level and gradually increase it based on your feedback and tolerance.

A single treatment session typically lasts between 15 and 30 minutes, depending on the size of the area being treated and the condition being addressed. For small spots like an elbow or an ankle, the session may be on the shorter side. For broader areas like a hip or a shoulder, it may take longer. The applicator is moved in slow, methodical passes over the target zone, and the practitioner may pause at specific trigger points to deliver extra pulses.

How many sessions are typically needed

Shockwave therapy is not a one-and-done treatment. Most protocols recommend a series of sessions spaced several days apart. The exact session frequency depends on the condition and how your body responds. For chronic issues like Achilles tendinopathy or patellar tendinopathy, a common schedule is three to six sessions over two to three weeks. Acute injuries may require fewer sessions, while long-standing problems might need more.

It is worth noting that results are not instant. The therapy works by stimulating your body's own repair mechanisms, which take time. Many people notice gradual improvement over the weeks following their last session, rather than a dramatic change right after the applicator is removed. That is why symptom tracking is useful. Keeping a simple log of how you feel each day, including pain levels, stiffness, and function in daily activities, can help you and your practitioner decide whether to continue, pause, or adjust the treatment plan.

Possible side effects and recovery period

Shockwave therapy is generally considered low-risk, but it is not completely free of side effects. The most common ones are temporary redness, mild swelling, and slight bruising in the treated area. These usually resolve within a day or two. Some people feel a bit sore for a few hours after the session, similar to the feeling after a deep tissue massage. This is a normal response and is part of the healing cascade.

There is no significant recovery period in the sense of needing to rest or avoid activity. In fact, most practitioners encourage gentle movement and light stretching after the session to help the tissues respond. However, you should avoid high-impact or intense training on the treated

area for at least 24 to 48 hours. If you experience sharp pain, worsening symptoms, or any unusual reaction, you should contact your practitioner promptly.

So what to expect from shockwave therapy in terms of the overall experience? It is a structured, non-invasive procedure that relies on your body's own healing capacity. You will undergo a thorough initial assessment, receive a series of targeted pulses that feel like quick taps, and then follow a schedule of multiple sessions over several weeks. The discomfort is minimal and temporary, and the potential benefit is a reduction in pain and improved function in the treated area.

Who should consider this treatment

Shockwave therapy is most often recommended for people with chronic soft tissue injuries, tendinopathies, or stubborn musculoskeletal pain that has not responded well to rest, stretching, or conventional physiotherapy. It can also be used for acute injuries where faster healing is desired. However, it is not appropriate for everyone. People with certain medical conditions, such as uncontrolled bleeding disorders, active infections near the treatment site, or those who are pregnant, should avoid it unless cleared by a doctor. The practitioner will review these contraindications during the clinical assessment.

In summary, what to expect from shockwave therapy is a well-defined process that begins with a detailed evaluation, proceeds through a series of short, tolerable treatment sessions, and ends with a gradual improvement that you can track on your own. The emphasis is on consistency and patience rather than instant fixes. If you have been living with a nagging injury that has not healed on its own, this acoustic wave treatment may offer a path forward without surgery or long-term medication.