



Review Article

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A REVIEW ON ABHYANGA: PHYSIOLOGICAL AND THERAPEUTIC EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

According to Ayurveda, twak (skin), the sparshanendriya adhisthana (site for tactile perception) is one of the important seats of Vata, the basic biological humour of the body responsible for all perceptions, micro and macro movements and all integrative functions. So application of oil, which is the best samana ausadhi (pacifying drug) for Vata, over the skin, is always beneficial to maintain Vata in its normal state. On the other hand, the normal functioning of Vata helps to keep the other doshas in normalcy as it (Vata) is the main controlling force for the other doshas. Other than this, regular practice of abhyanga (therapeutic oil massage) nourishes the body tissues, provides strength, makes person able to tolerate physical strains, enhances complexion and the lustre of the skin and increases the resistance power of the body against diseases, delays aging and so on. From the view point of the modern system of medicine, oil massage may show effects over different bodily systems, especially – Circulatory system, Nervous system, Musculoskeletal system, Immune system, Integumentary system etc. It also shows effects over metabolism, transportation of nutritive elements and excretory products, and the psychological state of a person.

Key words: Abhyanga, vata, twak, dosha

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, the Vedic system of medicine has two main aims – to maintain the health of a healthy person and to treat the diseased person¹. To attain these two goals different treatment modalities are advocated. One of these therapies which is given prime importance as a daily regimen for the achievement of better health and is equally important for the management of certain diseases is abhyanga² or medicated oil massage. It is also an important prerequisite for many Panchakarma procedures³.

Application of medicated oil over the body surface in a systematic manner with specialized techniques for a specific time is called abhyanga⁴. It is the commonest form of bahya-snehana (external oleation)⁵. According to Charaka, sparshanendriya which is located in skin is an important site of Vata; so, application of sneha over the skin pacifies the vitiated Vata and if practiced regularly, helps in preventing occurrence of diseases due to vitiated Vata⁶.

Abhyanga is advised to be practiced regularly as a part of dinacharya (daily regimen).⁷ According to Vagbhata abhyanga should be done daily with vataghna tailas having good smell⁸. Oil should be selected according to season, for example in ushna pradhana ritus (hot climate) oil predominantly having sita guna (cold property) and in sita pradhana ritus (cold climate) oil having ushna guna (hot property) are used. Again, Sushruta advised to do abhyanga with any sneha considering the ritu (climatic condition), desha (place), prakriti (psycho-somatic constitution), satmya (suitability), dosha (condition of the biological humours) and roga (disease)⁹.

BENEFITS OF ABHYANGA

1. Jarahara: It delays the ageing process. Abhyanga nourishes the dhatus and increases their strength thus helps in healthy aging.
2. Sramahara: It helps a person to overcome fatigue, because of routine hard work.
3. Vatahara: It prevents and corrects disorders caused by affliction of the vitiated Vata. Abhyanga helps in the promotion and regulation of the proper function of Vata.
4. Pustikara: It helps in the nourishment of all the seven dhatus.
5. Ayusyakara – It promotes longevity of an individual. The functions of the vital organs and tissues are improved and life span is promoted.
6. Swapnakara – It helps the individual to get sound sleep. Abhyanga is very useful to overcome sleeplessness and other mental ailments.
7. Twak-dardhyakara – It promotes sturdiness of an individual. abhyanga provides a passive form of exercise even for those who cannot perform active physical exercise because of debility and old age. Even for a normal healthy person, abhyanga provides sturdiness of the body, which keeps him healthy and happy.
8. Klesa-sahatva – Abhyanga increases the endurance of the muscles as a result the body becomes more capable of bearing strain and strain.
9. Abhighat-sahatva – Persons who regularly take abhyanga don't get very much affected with simple trauma like other individuals.
10. Kapha-Vata nirodhana – According to Sushruta abhyanga prevents both Vata and Kapha aggravation.
11. Varna-balaprada – Abhyanga improves the complexion of the skin and increases strength of the body^{10, 11, 12}.

Benefits of Pada-Abhyanga

- Alleviation of roughness, numbness, stiffness and fatigue of feet.
- Provides strength and firmness to feet.
- Pacification of Vata takes place, as a result sciatica, cracking of sole and other vatic disorders involving lower limb cannot develop.
- Improves vision¹³.

Benefits of Shiro- Abhyanga

- Cures shiro-roga.
- Softens the hair.
- Increases the growth of hair.
- Gives nourishment to hair.
- Produces softness in the skin of face.
- Nourishes the indriyas^{14,15}.

PROCEDURE OF ABHYANGA

Preparation and Precaution

- Before abhyanga the person should satisfy his natural urges.
- Person should not be hungry.
- Person should not take food prior to abhyanga therapy.
- Abhyanga should be done after the previous meal is properly digested.
- Person should not have any contraindication for abhyanga^{16,17}.

Main Procedure

- An appropriate sneha commonly oil is selected considering all the circumstances.
- At first oil is applied to scalp, ear, palm and sole.
- Sita (oil of room temperature) or sukhoshna (luke warm) oil is applied over scalp and ushna (bearably hot) oil is applied over the rest of the body.
- In limbs oil is massaged in anuloma direction i.e. from the central towards the periphery. Over the joints and abdomen circular massage is done.
- For proper abhyanga of all the body parts, the procedure is performed in seven postures in order: sitting, supine, right lateral, supine/prone, left lateral, supine, sitting.
- In each position abhyanga is to be done for about five minutes, i.e. for a total period of about thirty-five minutes.
- If abhyanga is done in a specific body part (sthanik abhyanga), it should be done for a minimum of fifteen minutes.

After Procedure

After abhyanga patient should take rest in the abhyanga table for fifteen minutes, then oil is cleaned with a warm wet cloth piece and the patient is allowed to take a hot water bath.

Duration of Abhyanga

Dalhana, the commentator of Sushruta has described the effect of abhyanga according to the duration. The oil used in abhyanga reaches to the root of hair of the skin if abhyanga is performed for 300 matras i.e. approximately 95 seconds. It reaches to the skin in 400 matras (133 sec.), reaches to Rakta dhatu in 500 matras (160 sec.), to Mamsa dhatu in 600 matras (190 sec.), to Meda dhatu in 700 matras (228 sec.), to the Asthi dhatu in 800 matras

(240 sec.) and it reaches Majja if abhyanga is performed for 900 matras (approximately 285 seconds). Thus, abhyanga should be done at least for 5 minutes in each position if one wants to get its benefits in all tissue levels¹⁸.

SELECTION OF OIL FOR ABHYANGA

- In Vataja disorders: Dhanvantaram taila, Bala taila, Balaaswagandhadi taila, Prasarini taila, Tila taila, Dashamula taila, Mahanarayan taila, Rasnadi taila etc.
- In Pitta associated conditions: Chandanadi taila, Chandanabalalakshadi taila, Kshirabala taila, Balaguduchyadi taila etc.
- In Kapha associated conditions: Karpasasthyadi taila, Kottamchukkadi taila etc.
- Jwara, Daha: Chandanadi taila, Madhuyastyadi taila, Satadhauta ghrita etc.
- Kustha : Kanaka kshiri taila, Mahamarichyadi taila, Somaraji taila
- Hikka, Swasa: Lavana taila
- Vatarakta: Pinda taila
- Apasmara: Sarshapa taila
- Muscle wasting: Mahamasha taila
- Sensory neuropathies: Chandanabalalakshadi taila, Dashamula amritadi taila etc.
- Musculoskeletal pain: Mahavishagarbha taila, Brihat saindhavadi taila, Panchaguna taila etc^{19,20,21}.

CONTRAINDICATIONS FOR ABHYANGA

- Kapha pradhan diseases.
- Who has just undergone sodhana (purification therapy) by Vamana (therapeutic emesis), Virechana (purgation) or Niruha vasti (decoction enema).
- Ajirna (indigestion) and saama dosha.
- Taruna jwara (acute fever).
- Santarpana janya vyadhis (diseases due to over nutrition)^{22,23}.

Other Contraindications

- Burns or open wounds on the area to be massaged.
- Cellulitis and acute inflammatory conditions.
- Patient with recent heart attack.
- Cancer - direct pressure on the tumor area should be avoided.
- Deep vein thrombosis.
- Unhealed fractures.
- Severe osteoporosis.
- Acute Inter Vertebral Disc prolapse.

EFFECTS OF ABHYANGA OVER DIFFERENT SYSTEMS

Effects on Cardio-vascular System

- Massage dilates superficial blood vessels and increases the rate of blood flow^{24,25}.
- Forceful massage in a healthy adult increase both local blood flow and cardiac stroke volume²⁶.
- Improves blood supply to the fatigued muscle and enhances recovery of muscle fatigue²⁷.
- When massage is applied to one limb, blood flow increases in the other²⁸.
- Specialized type of massage may even increase blood flow to deeply seated organs²⁶.
- Causes vasodilatation²⁶.

- Deep massage promotes venous return and will increase cardiac stroke volume²⁹
- Massage reduces swelling very effectively²⁶.
- Massage have a positive effect in controlling Hypertension³⁰.
- Helps to prevent Arteriosclerosis³⁰.

Effect on Blood Clotting

- Thrombosis frequently results from poor venous return and can be prevented by regular massage.²⁶
- May reduce the chance of development of Deep Vein Thrombosis.³¹

Effects on The Nervous System

- Massage has traditionally been used to relieve pain³². Massage produces short-lived analgesia by activating the 'pain gate' mechanism³³.
- Abhyanga highly influences the emotional state of a person. Mridu abhyanga or samvahana can induce tranquillity³⁰ and thus can suppress sympathetic over activation.
- Gentle massage is also having a sedative effect on nervous system³⁰.
- Massage helps in the release of endogenous opiates (inhibitory neurotransmitters) within the spinal segment receiving the painful input, this diminishes the intensity of pain transmitted to the higher centres³⁴.
- Massage improves the quality of sleep and decreases fatigue³⁵.

Effects on Musculoskeletal System

- Massage reduces discomfort, relieves muscle spasm and permits improved function³⁶.
- massage is a powerful technique used to maintain or improve the mobility of ligaments, tendons and muscle³⁷.
- different types of massages help to treat sports injuries effectively³⁷.

Psychological Effects

- Produces a sense of well-being
- Can lower the psycho-emotional and somatic arousal such as anxiety and tension³⁸.
- Reduces depression and anxiety, thus induces relaxation³⁸.
- Improves quality of sleep³⁵.
- It is having strong placebo effect on psychological state.

Immunological Effects

Improves functional ability of immune system by reducing limbic arousability and inducing relaxation. By relaxing the body and mind, immuno-modulatory effect can be achieved through psycho-neuro-immunological axis^{38,39}.

Effects on Respiratory System

Improves the act of respiration and pulmonary functions by strengthening and improving the tone of muscles involved in respiration⁴⁰.

Effects on Growth of Children

- Helps in weight gaining in preterm infants⁴¹.
- Improves immunity of the children⁴².
- Massage is effective in preventing prematurity, enhancing growth of infants, increasing attentiveness, decreasing

depression and aggression, alleviating motor problems, reducing pain, and enhancing immune function⁴³.

Effects on Pregnancy

Reduces anxiety, improves mood, improves sleep, reduces back pain, decreases urinary stress hormone (norepinephrine) level, causes less complication during labour and infants have less post-natal complications⁴⁴.

CONCLUSION

Abhyanga or therapeutic oil massage has been compared to oiling of the wheels of a chariot, which augments the overall working and increases the life of the wheels and subsequently benefits the chariot⁴⁵. Similar is the effect of abhyanga on the human body. Though maximum time abhyanga is considered as a part of daily regimen rather than a therapeutic measure, the above review of the previous research works shows its multi systemic effects which in turn prove its importance as a therapeutic modality both in preventive and curative aspects.

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