



Review Article

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ROLE OF NIDRA IN MENTAL HEALTH AND DISEASE MANIFESTATION: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

In Ayurveda, Nidra (sleep) is considered one of the Trayopastambha—the three fundamental pillars of life—along with Ahara (diet) and Brahmacharya (balanced lifestyle). Referred to as Bhutadhatri, the “nurturer of all beings,” sleep is essential for maintaining harmony between the body (Sharira), mind (Manas) and spirit (Atma). Classical Ayurvedic texts describe sound sleep as the foundation of strength, happiness, intellect and longevity, while disturbed sleep brings sorrow, weakness and disease. Modern science echoes these ideas, showing that both too little and too much sleep can lead to mental health issues, metabolic imbalance, weakened immunity and cognitive decline. This study aims to (1) explore the Ayurvedic concept of Nidra as a key factor in mental well-being, (2) examine its role in disease development from Ayurvedic and modern viewpoints (3) identify integrative strategies for prevention and management. A descriptive review was carried out using classical Ayurvedic treatises such as the Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita and Ashtanga Hridaya, supported by modern research findings. Ayurveda categorizes sleep disturbances as (i) Alpa Nidra – insufficient sleep caused by Vata aggravation, (ii) Ati Nidra – excessive sleep due to Kapha dominance, and (iii) Vikruta Nidra – irregular sleep resulting from Tridosha imbalance. Modern studies report similar patterns, linking insomnia with anxiety, hypersomnia with low mood and obesity, and irregular sleep with hormonal disruption. Both systems stress balanced routines, mental relaxation and lifestyle regulation. Integrating Ayurvedic principles with modern therapeutic approaches can effectively restore sleep health and enhance overall well-being.

Keywords: Nidra, Ayurveda, Mental Health, Dosha, Circadian Rhythm

INTRODUCTION

In a world that celebrates the all-nighter and the 24/7 grind, we've been conditioned to see sleep as a luxury or worse, a weakness. We wear our exhaustion like a badge of honour, sacrificing precious hours to get ahead, stay connected or just keep up. Yet, our bodies are telling a different story. Modern science reveals that sleep is anything but passive. It's a critical "housekeeping" routine where our brain's unique cleaning system, the lymphatic system, flushes out toxins that accumulate during the day.¹ A lack of sleep throws this entire process into chaos, leading to a cascade of problems: brain fog, a weakened immune system and a rise in stress hormones like cortisol that put us on a fast track to chronic disease.²

This modern health crisis, however, is not a new challenge. For thousands of years, ancient traditions have understood this truth on a deeper level. Ayurveda, for instance, identifies Nidra (sleep) as one of the three foundational pillars of a healthy life. It's not just about rest; it's the ultimate tool for balancing our dosha—the vital energies of Vata, Pitta and Kapha that govern our mind and body.³ A restless night isn't just about feeling tired; it's an indication of an internal imbalance that, left unchecked, can lead to serious health issues. This article is a journey to bridge these two powerful perspectives. By combining the scientific evidence with ancient wisdom, we can unlock a more complete understanding of why quality sleep is so vital. We'll explore how the biological imperatives modern science has uncovered align perfectly with the energetic balance described by Ayurveda. The

goal is to show you that prioritizing your sleep isn't a sign of weakness—it's the most powerful act of self-care you can take to fortify your mental clarity, emotional resilience and overall health. We've all been there: a long day, a tired mind and the simple desire to just fall into bed. But what happens when we do? For centuries, cultures around the world have known that Nidra or sleep is one of the most powerful tools we have for health. Ancient texts like the Charaka Samhita placed sleep on the same level as a healthy diet and lifestyle. Yet, in our fast-paced world, we often treat sleep as a luxury we can't afford. This article bridges the wisdom of the past with the science of today, showing you why sleep isn't just about resting—it's about repairing, restoring and revitalizing our entire being.

DISCUSSION

Nidra, often translated as "sleep" but encompassing a deeper, more holistic concept in traditional Indian thought, plays a profound and multifaceted role in mental health and the manifestation of disease.⁴ Beyond its basic function of physical rest, Nidra is a state of consciousness critical for psychological processing, emotional regulation and the maintenance of physiological homeostasis. Its disruption, therefore, has significant consequences, often acting as both a symptom and a cause of various mental and physical ailments. From a modern scientific perspective, Nidra is a complex neurobiological process involving distinct stages, including Non-Rapid Eye Movement (NREM) and Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep.⁵ These stages are vital for memory consolidation, learning and emotional

processing. During REM sleep, the brain is highly active, engaging in processes that are believed to be crucial for integrating emotional experiences and regulating mood.⁶ Disruptions to this cycle, as seen in conditions like insomnia and sleep apnoea, are strongly linked to the development of mental health disorders. For instance, chronic sleep deprivation can lead to increased irritability, anxiety and depression. The bidirectional relationship is key: while a mental health disorder can cause sleep problems, the lack of quality sleep can exacerbate the symptoms and make recovery more challenging.⁷

In the context of disease manifestation, the link between Nidra and physical health is well-established. Poor sleep is a recognized risk factor for a range of chronic conditions, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and a weakened immune system.⁷ The mechanisms behind this are complex and involve hormonal regulation, inflammatory responses and metabolic function. Sleep deprivation leads to an increase in cortisol, the stress hormone and a decrease in leptin, the hormone that signals satiety, while increasing ghrelin, which stimulates appetite.⁸ This hormonal imbalance can contribute to weight gain and insulin resistance, paving the way for metabolic disorders. Furthermore, the constant state of low-grade inflammation associated with poor sleep can damage blood vessels and contribute to the development of atherosclerosis and other cardiovascular diseases. From a traditional perspective, particularly within Ayurveda, Nidra is one of the three pillars of health, alongside Ahara (food) and Brahmacharya (abstinence/appropriate conduct).⁹ It is considered essential for the balance of the three dosha: Vata, Pitta and Kapha. A disturbed Nidra is seen as a sign of an imbalance, often involving an excess of Vata, the Dosha associated with movement and the nervous system. This imbalance can lead to anxiety, restlessness and a lack of mental clarity, which in turn perpetuates the sleep disturbance.¹⁰ The Ayurvedic approach to addressing these issues is holistic, focusing on restoring balance through diet, lifestyle adjustments, herbal remedies and practices like meditation and Yoga Nidra.

Yoga Nidra, a specific practice often translated as "yogic sleep," is a powerful tool for addressing the root causes of both mental and physical distress. It is a state of conscious deep relaxation, where the practitioner remains aware while the body and mind are completely at rest.¹¹ This practice is believed to bypass the conscious mind and access the subconscious, allowing for the release of deep-seated stress, trauma, and negative thought patterns.

Research on Yoga Nidra has shown its effectiveness in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression and PTSD, as well as improving sleep quality and overall well-being. It provides a structured method for achieving a state of profound rest that is often more restorative than conventional sleep, making it an invaluable therapeutic intervention. Nidra is far more than just a biological necessity; it is a cornerstone of human health and a barometer of one's psychological and physiological state. Its disruption is a critical factor in the aetiology and exacerbation of mental health disorders and a wide range of physical diseases. Understanding the intricate relationship between Nidra and well-being, from both a modern scientific and a traditional philosophical standpoint, is essential for developing comprehensive and effective strategies for prevention, treatment and promoting holistic health. Addressing sleep disturbances should be a primary concern in any therapeutic intervention, as restoring this fundamental pillar of health is often the first step on the path to healing.

The Science of Sleep: More Than Just Shutting Down

- Sleep isn't a passive state of "doing nothing." It's a highly active, orchestrated process. Think of it as your brain and body's nightly maintenance crew.¹²
- Deep Sleep (NREM): This is where the physical repairs happen. Your body releases growth hormones, your tissues heal and your brain's unique cleaning system, the lymphatic system, flushes out harmful waste that builds up during the day.¹
- Dreaming Sleep (REM): This stage is all about the mind. Your brain processes memories, sorts through emotions, and forges new neural connections. It's like a nightly therapy session, helping you make sense of your experiences and regulate your feelings.
- When we short change ourselves on sleep, this entire process gets thrown off. That's why a bad night's sleep can leave you feeling foggy, irritable and more likely to get sick.

An Ayurvedic Take on Nidra: Balancing Your Body's Energies

- Ayurveda views sleep as a reflection of your body's three primary energies or dosha (Vata, Pitta and Kapha). A healthy, balanced sleep is a sign that these energies are in harmony.³
- If your Vata energy is out of balance, you might experience light, restless sleep. You might have trouble falling asleep or wake up frequently, feeling more tired than when you went to bed.
- A Pitta imbalance can make you feel hot and bothered at night. You might wake up feeling irritable, with night sweats or hot flashes.
- An excess of Kapha energy can lead to oversleeping or feeling sluggish and groggy, even after a full night's rest.
- For Ayurveda, the quality of your sleep is just as important as the quantity. A deep, peaceful sleep is considered pure and restorative, helping to clear the mind and stabilize emotions.

The Unspoken Link: Sleep, Mental Health And Disease

Here's the thing: your mental state and your physical health are inextricably linked to your sleep. Chronic sleep deprivation is a powerful stressor. It triggers your body's "fight or flight" response, pumping you full of cortisol—the stress hormone. This constant state of stress not only fuels anxiety and depression but also puts a strain on your heart, raising your risk for high blood pressure and heart disease.²

What's more, a tired brain is a less regulated brain. The part of your brain that processes fear and emotions (the amygdala) goes into overdrive, while the part that helps you stay calm and rational (the prefrontal cortex) takes a nap. This leaves you more vulnerable to emotional outbursts and makes it harder to bounce back from stress.³

Simple Ways to Improve Your Sleep and Health

- Taking control of your sleep doesn't have to be complicated. Small, consistent changes can make a world of difference.
- **Stick to a Schedule:** Go to bed and wake up around the same time every day, even on weekends. This helps regulate your body's internal clock.
- **Create a Nightly Ritual:** Wind down before bed with calming activities like reading a book, taking a warm bath or stretching.

Make Your Bedroom A Sanctuary: Keep It Dark, Quiet and Cool

- **Ditch the Screens:** The blue light from phones and computers tricks your brain into thinking it's daytime, messing with your sleep hormones.

- **Embrace Stillness:** Practices like mindfulness and meditation can help calm a racing mind, making it easier to drift off to sleep.

CONCLUSION

Sleep is not simply “switching off” for the night—it’s the body’s most powerful form of self-repair. In Ayurveda, Nidra is honoured as one of the three pillars of life, alongside nourishing food and a balanced lifestyle. It feeds not only the body but also the mind and spirit, helping us wake up clear-headed, emotionally steady, and physically strong. When sleep is disturbed—whether too little, too much or erratic—it’s often a sign that something deeper is out of balance. Ancient Ayurvedic wisdom teaches us to read these signals, tracing them back to imbalances in Vata, Pitta or Kapha and correcting them through gentle, consistent practices—like mindful routines, a wholesome diet, oil massages and calming the mind before bed. Modern science echoes these truths, showing how poor sleep can disturb hormones, weaken immunity and increase the risk of mental and physical illness. It also gives us powerful tools to detect problems early and manage acute symptoms effectively.

When these two approaches meet, they form a complete circle of care—Ayurveda addressing the roots, modern medicine offering precision and speed. Together, they can help us not only fix sleep problems but prevent them, restoring a natural rhythm that supports clarity, energy and resilience. In a world that rarely pauses, protecting our Nidra is not indulgence—it’s essential for living well and staying well.

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