

The Ayurvedic Massage Concept: From Theory to Clinical Application

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Abstract:

Classical term 'Abhyanga' in Ayurvedic Medicine is considered best for preventing diseases and promoting health known as 'Ayurvedic Massage' widely practised in Indian sub-continent, its an important and most commonly practised procedure from Paediatrics to Geriatrics. Most of the people understand Ayurvedic Massage therapy as oil application and massaging. It involves, vast considerations of therapy which includes the body humors, Seven Dhātus (Tissues), constitution of an individual with other considerations like selection of medicated oils, temperature, time, kind of friction and frequency of application, etc. The efficacy of Ayurvedic Massage therapy also depends on the appropriate selection of drug (according to condition/disease), skill of therapist, co-operation of patient and dietary regimens to be followed by the individual during and after the therapeutic procedure. In this article, the authors tried to explore the deeper understandings of Ayurvedic concept of massage therapy from theory to clinical application through a critical and analytical review.

Keywords:

Abhyanga, Ayurvedic massage, Therapeutic oil massage.

Introduction:

Massage' has been practiced since time immemorial. The history of massage dates back to 3000 BCE (or earlier) in India, where it was considered a sacred system of natural healing. In traditional Indian medical care massage techniques play an important part. Massage has been in ancient India developed as an art and was included in the 64 Kalaas or arts (Lakshmi pathi, 1959). It is an inseparable part of Indian culture. A massage treatment, usually helps in managing proper health condition and enhance wellness, may last from 15 to 90 minutes (Vickers et al. 2001). Ayurvedic massage involves manipulating the soft tissues of the body with hands and fingers sometimes, even forearms, elbows, or feet are used with or pressure. Abhyanga or Massage therapy in Ayurveda is included as one of the 'Bahirparimarjana chikitsa'

(External Therapy). Abhyanga is known as Ayurvedic Massage (AM) and has got worldwide popularity. AM is systematic application of medicated oil on soft tissue all over the body lubrication to enhance health and wellbeing. AM with oil is done daily to maintain good health as well as longevity and it forms a vital part of snehana (oleation) which is an indispensable prelude to panchakarma therapy (five detoxification treatment modality) in Ayurveda. Ayurvedic massage is one of the procedures among 'dinacharya', (daily regimen) which is performed daily to maintain health and to prevent disease. Acharya Vagbhata mentions Abhyanga (AM) is to be performed daily, if not daily then at least applying ayurvedic oils to the head, ears and foot is must for a healthy life. There are over 35 known massage types, each having its own unique characteristics with a wide variety of pressures, movements and techniques.

Ayurvedic Massage therapy entails providing external stimulation and manipulation over the body i.e., skin and muscles, which are affected. A critical review of Abhyanga vis-à-vis Ayurvedic massage with special emphasis given upon interpreting the Ayurvedic and modern literature. The present article is a review, where an attempt is made with relevant basic science of Ayurveda and contemporary study for future research.

Methodology:

Present study is a review study; the available literature like the Ayurvedic classics: The Samhita Grantha's, Samgraha's and other books are searched with all relevant contents are considered and analyzed. Various published research articles are also searched

in this study to get a comprehensive concept on Abhyanga (Ayurvedic massage.)

Role of Ayurvedic Massage: Ayurvedic massage appears for preventing the diseases as well as cures the diseases and promotes the health for longevity. Acharya Charaka mentions it can give best schedule via Dinacharya (Daily Routine) and Ritucharya (Seasonal Regimen) which can keep persons healthy. In earlier times, Abhyanga was part and parcel of routine life because of immense benefits. It helps to build strong body and keeps disease free.

Abhyanga is a part of Panchakarma therapy which is a subtype of external oblation therapy. The Ayurvedic classical texts have mentioned about its qualities and practice. Both in preventive and therapeutic purpose, it has been used with great results.

AM makes healthy of all the organs of body by purifying blood and stimulating muscles and nerves. Ultra modern life style puts a lot of stress and tension, so lot of peoples are attracted towards Ayurvedic centres for a relief.

Table 1: Showing five basic movements involved in Manipulation Techniques (Vickers et al. 2001)

| Sl. No. | Name of the Techniques |
|---------|--|
| 1 | Effleurage (circular stroking movements) |
| 2 | Petrissage (kneading movements) |
| 3 | Friction (rubbing strokes) |
| 4 | Vibration (shaking movements to loosen the body) |
| 5 | Tapotement (tapping) |

Common technique of massage according to their movements can be sub-categorised as:

- i) Touch sensation – Sensation that is carried through brain.
- ii) Stroke – Touch with one/both palms slowly with movement.
- iii) Kneading – Grasping the underlined body surfaces by alternative compression of the tissues.
- iv) Percussion – Administration of movements / blows in various ways with varying degrees of force.
- vi) Joint movements – Assisted and resisted both types of movements are performed.

Procedure and Time Duration:

Ayurvedic Massage may be done with warm medicated oil (38-40°C) in an empty stomach, preferably in a comfortable warm ventilated room. The client is asked to be with minimal cloth on the body. A specially designed massage table called Droni is used. The direction of massage is usually Anulomagati i.e., towards the growth of hair. For limbs, the direction of movement should be downwards from above.

While clockwise-circular should be performed for the chest, abdomen, gluteal area and joints. The time duration of treatment may vary upto 48 to 90 minutes demanding on the condition. Generally, it is carried out in morning hours, free from any pollution and sound. If the situation demands, it can be carried out as emergency too. As required, one to four therapists can be involved in the process. An instrumental or slow music is an add on therapy which calms the mind of the client. The pre-requisite for the treatment are the therapists should maintain proper hygiene (trimmed nails) of his/her fingers. As the procedure involves close physical contact so a cross massage is avoided, except in paediatric and geriatric cases.

Few techniques also include strong pressure which may cause painful sensations, but usually these are short lived.

According to seasons, abhyangais advised to protect the body from extreme cold and dry weather i.e., winter season (Patil 2010). It is beneficial to counteract the effect of cold.

Table 2: Showing seven different postures followed during Abhyanga

| Sl. No. | Different Postures |
|---------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Sitting upright with knees extended |
| 2 | Supine position |
| 3 | Left lateral position |
| 4 | Prone position |
| 5 | Right lateral position |
| 6 | Supine position |
| 7 | Sitting upright with knees extended |

Precautions:

Ayurvedic text Sushruta Samhita mentions there are 107 vital points in human body which are known as Marma. An injury to any of these vital points can cause severe pain, swelling, disability and even death. These marmas or vital points have great importance in treatment in Chinese medicine known as Accupressure points. An injury or trauma on this point can bring disability or even death. So, Ayurvedic massage therapists are well trained about these points for no/low risk and adverse effects.

Mode of Action:

Ayurvedic Massage has gained great significance in present day practice. It works on two levels i.e., Physical and Psychological. A physical rub to the body can produce heat and can increase the circulation of blood. This affects the lymphatic system and can supply proper nourishment to the blood. Whereas, psychologically through a touch, massage may work on the nervous system and can affect the circulation of various hormones. (Patil 2010) Massage can produce mechanical pressure, which is expected to increase muscle compliance resulting in increased range of joint motion, decreased passive stiffness and decreased active stiffness (biomechanical mechanisms). Mechanical pressure might help to increase blood flow by increasing the arteriolar pressure, as well as increasing muscle temperature from rubbing. (Weerapong et al. 2005). Ayurvedic massage done in specific directions can improve blood circulation and may facilitate removal of the toxins from tissues. Thus relieves physical and mental fatigue. The stroke or Pakshaghata patients have been reported improvements after Ayurvedic massage (Sankaran et al. 2019). It is found to be useful in curing many of the disease belonging to the various system of the body. Oil massage in Ayurveda is a topical therapy and convenient method of treatment, but its efficacy depends on an understanding of the barrier function of the skin, primarily within the stratum corneum. The epidermal barrier and parameters controlling absorption through that barrier must be understood for effective use of topical drug delivery.

Table 3: Showing the beneficial effects of oil massage as per Ayurvedic texts

| Sl. No. | Types | Benefits |
|---------|---|--|
| 1 | <i>Shiro Abhyanga</i> (Head massage) | <i>Shirobhyanga</i> does nourishment to the head and sense organs. On a daily application person does not suffer from shirashoola (headache), Khalitya, palitya, keshapatanam, increases the bala (strength) of shiras and kapala, indriyaprasada, good for skin and produces sound sleep. |
| 2 | <i>Karna Abhyanga</i> (Ear massage) | <i>Karnabhyanga</i> relives the pain of hanu (lower jaw), manya (neck), shiras(head), karna(Ear). Performing Karna abhyanga daily a person will not suffer from vataja rogas, manyagraha (Spasm or contraction of neck), hanugraha (lockjaw), badhitya (deafness), uchairsuti (hardness of hearing.) |
| 3 | <i>Pada Abhyanga</i> (Foot massage) | Application of oil to the feet, relieves kharatva (roughness), rookshatva (dryness), Sthabdhata (immobility), srama(fatigue), supti (numbness) instantaneously gets cured, improves eyesight and mitigates vata. The person will not suffer from gridhrasi(sciatica), padasphutana (cracking of feet), sira-snyayu sankocha (constriction of veins and ligaments.) |

Table 4: Showing Indications and Contraindications for Oil Massage
(Babu 2011; Tripathi, 2012)

| Sl. No. | Indications for Abhyanga (Oil Massage) | Contraindications for Abhyanga (Oil Massage) |
|---------|--|--|
| 1 | Oil massage can be used in both healthy and diseased persons. | Oil massage therapy should not be used when kaphaja or kapha (phlegm) are the predominant symptoms or when the symptoms are caused by toxic matter (Ama dosha) |
| 2 | It is also recommended for persons preparing for purification and sudation (or sweating) therapy. | In generalized ama dosha, oil massage can worsen the condition. |
| 3 | People who excessively indulge in alcohol, intercourse, and exercise will also benefit from oil massage therapy. | It should not be used after niruha basti (decoction enema.) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4 | Oil massage can also be useful for people who spend a lot of time in thinking like Scientists and Philosophers. | People suffering from indigestion or diseases caused by excessive nutrition should not undergo oil massage. |
| 5 | It is helpful for the Elderly and children, as well as people who are debilitated or emaciated. | It should be avoided by people with acute fever or emesis, including those who are being treated with purgation therapy. If oil massage is performed in the above conditions, it will cause Agnimandya (decreased digestive fire) and worsen the disease condition. |

Table 5: Showing some commonly practiced Sneha Yogas for Ayurvedic Massage:

| Sl. No. | Dosha | Name of Sneha Yogas (Mahadevan, 2014) |
|---------|----------------|--|
| 1 | Vataja | TilaTaila, Mahanarayana Taila, Bala taila, Shuddhabala taila, Ksheerabala taila, Dhanwantaram taila, Dashamoola Taila, Swadamstradi taila, Ketakyadi taila, Sahacharadi Taila, Balashwagandhadi taila etc. |
| 2 | Pittaja | Murchita Goghrita, Chatuhsneham, Madhuyashtyadi Taila, Chandanadi Taila etc. |
| 3 | Kaphaja | Triphaladi Taila, Saindhavadi Taila, Sarshapa Taila, etc. |
| 4 | Raktaja | Pinda Taila, Chandanabaladi Taila, Narikela Taila etc. |

Discussion:

Ayurvedic Massage does not merely mean oil rubbing, kneading or pummelling. It is a procedure to antagonize the lymphatic drainage which is the primary path for removal of toxins from the body. This can be understood that Abhyanga (AM) plays a major role on body's lymphatic drainage which includes jarahara (slows down ageing process), sramahara (decreases fatigue caused by physical work), vatahara (prevents disorders caused by vata dosha), drushti prasadakara (improves eyesight, eye diseases caused due to ageing), pushtikara (nourishes all dhatus/ tissues), ayushya (functions of vital organs are improved and life span is promoted) and useful to overcome sleeplessness (Patil 2010)

Various kinds of therapeutic massages are been practiced today. Anatomical consideration of body is beneficial while performing Ayurvedic massage. AM increases the circulation of vital fluid in the applied part which also stimulates the central and autonomic nervous system. This provides a soothing and relaxing effect to the client. Skin is the largest organ of body and also a rich source of healing substances.

Skin is quite sensitive to the touch therapy.

To restore good health with longer life, the body function needs to be balanced then it is the best means of preventing disease.

Ayurvedic Massage is done to the direction of hair growth which prevents any damage to the root of the hair. A uniform circular movement over the joint facilitates lymph and venous drainage. Mostly the lymph nodes are situated in the joint spaces and collateral venous networks. So, uniform circular movements help in emptying these vessels. Fundamentally the lymphatic system is a drainage system which is accessory to the venous system which defends the body from viruses, bacteria and other harmful agents. A lymphatic system aids the immune system in expelling out and destroying debris, waste, dead cells, toxins, pathogens, and cancer cells. AM can stimulate the lymphatic system. This system is pervasive throughout the body, except in the brain, bone marrow and deep skeletal muscle. Lymph plays an important role in the various forms of oedema. So, by rubbing the joints in circular manner, the motion is enhanced which causes more protein, glucose, minerals oxygen, and antibodies, involved with the lymphatic system, which circulate in the blood as a result of vasodilatation, there is an increased flow of blood through the area, so necessary oxygen and nutritive materials are supplied and waste products are removed. The role of this system is to carry nutrients to and remove toxins from the cells. Overall, it contains many white blood cells that help maintain the body's resistance to immune disorders, forming these infection-fighting cells in the nodes. This system contains various amino acids (Sadashiva Tirtha 2007). Tryptophan is an acid required for producing energy and balancing the hormonal and nervous systems. When histamine is in excess, it can cause gastric acidity, lethargy, itching, headaches, pain in muscles, nodes, allergies and could help the body produce its own natural antihistamines.

The process of Abhyanga increase venous return by direct mechanical and reflex on blood vessels. Its importance to three vital areas are Shira (head), Karna (ears) and Pada (foot) are pointed in the Ayurvedic texts (Patil 2010). If not done daily at least one should apply oil to the head, ears and feet which can improve the quality of life benefitting persons of all ages. Thus, AM is designed to relax the muscles, relieve pain, reduce stress, improves metabolism, as well as influence the nervous system or specific organs. It is a pre-requisite of shodhana chikitsa and also one of the most effective treatments in marma vidha (Vital) conditions.

Conclusion:

Ayurvedic Massage therapy is a multimodal treatment approach. It involves gently massaging the body with ayurvedic oils and rhythmical stroking movements. According to the principles of Ayurveda, this has a cleansing and relaxing effect. It has potential psychogenic and physiologic benefit which helps in body's vital fluid circulation. As a result stimulates the nervous system provides a relaxing effect from paediatrics to geriatrics. The outcome depends upon the skill of the therapist. Therapeutic benefits can be achieved to promote health and disease-free state. These can directly be related with the stimulation of central and autonomic nervous system and improvement in lymphatic drainage. This needs more research and standardization on its therapeutic effect as well as safety implications of using various herbal oils.

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