



Review Article

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AYURVEDIC MANAGEMENT OF ANIDRA (INSOMNIA): A SHORT REVIEW OF SHIRODHARA AND NASYA

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Abstract

Sleep (Nidra) is one of the three fundamental pillars of life (*Trayopastambha*) described in Ayurveda and is essential for maintaining physical, mental, and emotional health. Disturbance of sleep results in *Anidra* (insomnia), a condition commonly associated with aggravated *Vata* and *Pitta doshas*. In the modern era, increasing stress, irregular lifestyles, excessive screen exposure, and psychological strain have significantly increased the prevalence of insomnia, making it a major public health concern. Conventional management mainly relies on sedatives and hypnotics, which often lead to dependency and adverse effects, emphasizing the need for safe and holistic therapeutic alternatives. Ayurveda offers effective management of *Anidra* through *Panchakarma* therapies that aim to restore *doshic* balance and stabilize mental functions. Among these, *Shirodhara* and *Nasya* play a pivotal role due to their direct action on the central nervous system. *Shirodhara* induces deep relaxation and reduces stress by modulating neuroendocrine functions, while *Nasya* regulates *Prana Vayu* and nourishes brain tissues through nasal drug administration. Modern scientific studies support their role in regulating neurotransmitters such as serotonin and melatonin, reducing cortisol levels, and improving autonomic balance. This short review highlights the Ayurvedic concept of *Anidra* and evaluates the role of *Shirodhara* and *Nasya* as effective, non-invasive, and holistic approaches for the management of insomnia.

Keywords: *Nidra; Anidra; Insomnia; Shirodhara; Nasya*

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Introduction

Sleep (*Nidra*) is one of the three fundamental pillars of life (*Trayopastambha*) in Ayurveda, along with *Ahara* (diet) and *Brahmacharya* (regulated lifestyle). Proper sleep is essential for maintaining physical strength, mental clarity, emotional balance, and overall well-being¹. Ayurveda describes *Nidra* as a natural restorative state that occurs when the mind (*Manas*) and sensory organs (*Indriyas*) withdraw from their activities, allowing physiological and psychological rejuvenation².

Disturbance of this process leads to *Anidra* (insomnia), characterized by difficulty in initiating or maintaining sleep, early awakening, and non-refreshing sleep. According to Ayurveda, *Anidra* is mainly caused by aggravation of *Vata* and *Pitta doshas*. *Vata* aggravation produces restlessness, anxiety, and irregular sleep, while increased *Pitta* leads to excessive mental stimulation and disturbed sleep. Prolonged *Anidra* results in depletion of *Ojas* and adversely affects physical and mental health^{3&4}.

Insomnia is a common global health problem, affecting approximately 10–30% of adults, with chronic insomnia seen in nearly 6% of the population. Rising stress levels, irregular lifestyles, excessive screen exposure, and sedentary habits have further increased its prevalence. Conventional treatment relies mainly on sedatives and hypnotics, which may cause dependence and adverse effects, highlighting the need for safe and holistic alternatives⁵.

Concept of *Anidra* in Ayurveda

Ayurveda explains that sleep is naturally induced by *Kapha* and *Tamas* dominance, while aggravated *Vata*, *Pitta*, and excessive *Rajoguna* disturb sleep. Classical texts classify *Anidra* based on causative factors into *Dosha-dushti Anidra* (*doshic* imbalance), *Manasika Anidra* (psychological causes), and *Ahara–Vihara-janya Anidra* (dietary and lifestyle-related). Involvement of *Majja Dhatu* and *Rasavaha Srotas* plays a key role in chronic insomnia^{6&7}.

Panchakarma in the Management of *Anidra*

Panchakarma is a unique Ayurvedic detoxification and rejuvenation therapy aimed at restoring *doshic* balance and eliminating accumulated toxins. Among its procedures, *Shirodhara* and *Nasya* are particularly effective in managing *Anidra* due to their direct action on the nervous system and mind. These therapies pacify aggravated *Vata* and *Pitta doshas* and promote mental relaxation^{8&9}.

Role of *Shirodhara*

Shirodhara involves the continuous pouring of medicated oil or liquid over the forehead, particularly over the *Ajna Chakra* region. It induces a deep state of relaxation, reduces stress, and calms the central nervous system. Modern studies suggest that *Shirodhara* helps regulate neurotransmitters such as serotonin and melatonin, reduces cortisol levels, and enhances parasympathetic activity, thereby improving sleep quality. It is especially beneficial in stress-induced and anxiety-related insomnia^{10&11}.

Role of *Nasya*

Nasya is the administration of medicated oils through the nasal route and is considered highly effective for disorders of the head and brain, as the nose is regarded as the gateway to the brain (*Shirodvara*)¹². *Nasya* regulates *Prana Vayu*, nourishes brain tissues, and stabilizes mental functions¹³. Medicated oils used in *Nasya* therapy have been shown to reduce anxiety, improve sleep quality, and support restorative sleep by modulating autonomic and neurotransmitter activity¹⁴.

Discussion

Both *Shirodhara* and *Nasya* play a multidimensional role in the management of *Anidra* (insomnia) by targeting not only the symptomatic presentation of disturbed sleep but also the underlying pathophysiological mechanisms described in Ayurveda. *Anidra* is primarily associated with aggravation of *Vata* and *Pitta dosha*, along with mental factors such as *Rajas* predominance. These therapies act at both somatic and psychological levels to restore equilibrium.

Shirodhara, through the continuous and rhythmic pouring of medicated liquids over the forehead, exerts a profound calming influence on the central nervous system. The gentle tactile stimulation over the *Ajna region* is believed to modulate hypothalamic activity, thereby influencing circadian rhythm regulation and endocrine function. From a neurophysiological perspective, *Shirodhara* may enhance parasympathetic dominance, reduce sympathetic overactivity, and lower cortisol levels - factors commonly elevated in chronic insomnia. The steady sensory input also promotes alpha wave activity in the brain, which correlates with a state of relaxed alertness and facilitates the transition to deeper stages of sleep. Thus, *Shirodhara* addresses stress-induced hyperarousal, a major contributor to sleep disturbance.

Nasya, on the other hand, provides a more direct therapeutic pathway to the cranial region. By administering medicated oils or formulations through the nasal route—the gateway to *Shiras* (head) - *Nasya* influences *Prana Vayu*, which governs higher neurological functions including cognition, emotional balance, and sleep regulation. The nasal mucosa offers a rapid absorption pathway to the central nervous system via olfactory and trigeminal pathways. This may help modulate neurotransmitters involved in sleep regulation, such as serotonin and melatonin. Additionally, *Nasya* aids in clearing accumulated *doshas* from the supraclavicular region, thereby relieving mental heaviness, anxiety, and restlessness that often accompany *Anidra*.

When viewed integratively, *Shirodhara* primarily reduces psychophysiological stress and induces systemic relaxation, while *Nasya* fine-tunes neurological and pranic functions. Contemporary studies suggest that both therapies contribute to improved sleep latency, increased total sleep duration, and better sleep efficiency. Their role in enhancing heart rate variability and balancing autonomic tone further substantiates their clinical relevance in stress-related insomnia.

Therefore, the combined or individualized application of *Shirodhara* and *Nasya* offers a holistic therapeutic approach - simultaneously harmonizing doshic imbalance, stabilizing mental faculties, and regulating neuroendocrine pathways - making them valuable non-pharmacological interventions in the management of *Anidra*.

Conclusion

Anidra is a multifactorial disorder with significant impact on quality of life. Ayurvedic *Panchakarma* therapies, particularly *Shirodhara* and *Nasya*, provide safe, effective, and holistic management of insomnia. These therapies not only improve sleep quality but also address the root cause by restoring *doshic* balance and mental stability. Further clinical studies and integrative research are needed to strengthen evidence-based application of these therapies in contemporary sleep medicine.

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