



Review Article

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PHARMACOLOGY OF ABHYANGA: AN AYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Abhyanga, the practice of systematic oil massage, holds a significant place in Ayurveda as both a preventive and therapeutic measure. It is described as an essential component of Dinacharya as well as an important Poorva Karma in Panchakarma therapies. Beyond its visible effects on the skin and muscles, Abhyanga exerts deep pharmacological actions on Dosha, Dhatu, Mala, and Srotas. These effects are mediated through the properties of Sneha Dravya, the role of Bhrajaka Pitta, and the unique Ayurvedic understanding of transdermal absorption. This article presents a detailed and original discussion on the pharmacology of Abhyanga in a simple, humanized, and examination-oriented manner, strictly based on Ayurvedic principles.

Keywords – *Abhyanga, Panchakarma therapies, Sneha Dravya*

Introduction

Ayurveda emphasizes the maintenance of health as much as the treatment of disease. Among the daily regimens described to preserve health, Abhyanga is considered one of the most important. Classical texts repeatedly highlight that regular Abhyanga promotes strength, delays aging, improves complexion, and stabilizes both body and mind.¹ Unlike modern massage concepts, Abhyanga is not limited to mechanical manipulation of tissues. It is a

therapeutic procedure in which Sneha Dravya is applied and absorbed through the skin to influence systemic physiology.²

From a pharmacological viewpoint, Abhyanga can be understood as an external drug delivery system described thousands of years ago in Ayurvedic literature.³ The oils used are not inert substances; they are pharmaceutically processed formulations containing lipid-soluble active principles of medicinal herbs. Through the action of Bhrajaka Pitta and the network of Srotas, these substances exert local as well as systemic effects. Understanding the pharmacology of Abhyanga is therefore essential for Ayurvedic students and clinicians.⁴

Ayurvedic Concept of Skin and Its Pharmacological Importance

In Ayurveda, the skin (Twak) is not viewed merely as a protective covering but as a living, metabolically active organ. Charaka explains that Twak is formed from Mamsa Dhatu during intrauterine development, while Sushruta describes seven distinct layers of skin, each associated with specific pathological conditions. This layered structure highlights the depth to which external therapies can act.⁵

Twak is the seat of Bhrajaka Pitta, a subtype of Pitta Dosha responsible for complexion, temperature regulation, and metabolism of substances applied externally. Any Sneha or Lepa applied over the skin is first processed by Bhrajaka Pitta. This concept forms the foundation of the pharmacological action of Abhyanga. The skin is also closely associated with Vyana Vayu, which governs circulation and distribution of nutrients. Thus, substances absorbed through the skin can be distributed throughout the body.

Sneha Dravya: The Pharmacological Base of Abhyanga

Sneha Dravya are lipid-based substances that possess unctuous, nourishing, and penetrating qualities. Ayurveda describes four types of Sneha: Taila, Ghrita, Vasa, and Majja. Among these, Taila is most commonly used in Abhyanga due to its superior Vata-pacifying action and deeper tissue penetration.

Taila is described as Snigdha, Guru, Sara, Sukshma, and Vyavayi. Its Madhura Rasa, Ushna Virya, and Katu Vipaka make it especially effective in counteracting the Ruksha, Laghu, and Sheeta qualities of Vata Dosha. These properties allow oil to spread quickly throughout the body and nourish deeper tissues.

When Taila is medicated with herbs, the pharmacological profile expands further. The lipid medium extracts fat-soluble active principles from herbs, enhances their bioavailability, and

facilitates their transport across skin layers. Thus, medicated oils act as complex polyherbal formulations with targeted therapeutic actions.⁶

Mode of Action of Abhyanga

The pharmacological action of Abhyanga can be explained in a stepwise manner according to Ayurvedic principles. Initially, the Sneha acts locally on the skin, improving softness, elasticity, and complexion. With continued massage, oil penetrates deeper through Sukshma and Vyavayi properties.

Bhrajaka Pitta metabolizes the applied Sneha and facilitates its absorption. The gentle pressure and warmth produced during massage stimulate Vyana Vayu, enhancing circulation. Through the network of Srotas, the absorbed Sneha reaches different Dhatus. Classical references mention that oil nourishes Twak first, followed by Rakta, Mamsa, Asthi, and Majja with prolonged and regular application. This explains why Abhyanga is beneficial not only in superficial disorders but also in deep-seated conditions such as neurological disorders, joint diseases, and degenerative conditions.

Effect of Abhyanga on Dosha

Abhyanga has a Dosha-specific pharmacological action, depending on the type of Sneha used and the method of application. Vata Dosha is most effectively pacified by Abhyanga. The unctuousness and warmth of oil counteract dryness, coldness, and instability of Vata. Clinically, this results in reduced pain, improved joint mobility, better sleep, and mental calmness.

Pitta Dosha can be pacified when cooling Sneha such as Ghrita or coconut oil is used. Abhyanga in such cases reduces burning sensation, inflammation, and excessive heat.

In Kapha-dominant individuals, Abhyanga should be performed with lighter oils and appropriate pressure. It helps liquefy accumulated Kapha, reduce stiffness, and improve circulation.⁷

Effect on Dhatu and Bala

Abhyanga plays a significant role in Dhatu Poshana. By improving Rasa Dhatu, it enhances overall nourishment and immunity. Improved Rasa circulation leads to better Rakta formation, resulting in healthy complexion and vitality. On Mamsa Dhatu, Abhyanga

improves muscle tone, strength, and endurance. It is particularly useful in conditions involving muscle fatigue and wasting.

Regular Abhyanga nourishes Asthi and Majja Dhatu, providing stability to bones and strength to the nervous system. This explains its usefulness in disorders such as osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, and neurological diseases. By enhancing Dhatu Bala, Abhyanga contributes to overall physical and mental strength.

Effect on Srotas and Mala

Abhyanga helps maintain the patency and normal functioning of Srotas. The warmth and unctuousness relieve stiffness and obstruction, facilitating smooth flow of Dosha and Dhatu. It particularly benefits Rasavaha, Mamsavaha, and Swedavaha Srotas. By stimulating Swedavaha Srotas, Abhyanga promotes proper sweating, which aids in elimination of waste products and regulation of body temperature. It also indirectly supports proper functioning of Mala by improving metabolism and circulation.⁸

Clinical and Preventive Importance

From a pharmacological and clinical perspective, Abhyanga serves both preventive and curative purposes. Regular practice delays aging, improves immunity, enhances sleep quality, and maintains musculoskeletal health. Therapeutically, it is useful in Vata disorders, stress-related conditions, skin diseases, and degenerative disorders.

Its role as a Poorva Karma enhances the effectiveness of Panchakarma by mobilizing Dosha from peripheral tissues toward the gastrointestinal tract. Thus, Abhyanga acts as a preparatory pharmacological intervention that amplifies the outcome of detoxification therapies.⁹

Conclusion

Abhyanga is a scientifically sound therapeutic procedure deeply rooted in Ayurvedic pharmacological principles. Its actions are mediated through Sneha Dravya, Bhrajaka Pitta, and the intricate network of Srotas and Dhatus. Far beyond a simple oil massage, Abhyanga represents an advanced form of transdermal drug delivery described in classical Ayurveda. Understanding its pharmacology helps in rational selection of oils, proper application, and effective clinical use. When practiced correctly, Abhyanga contributes significantly to health promotion, disease prevention, and holistic well-being.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST –NIL

SOURCE OF SUPPORT –NONE

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