



ISSN 2456-3110

Vol 5 · Issue 4

July-Aug 2020

Journal of
**Ayurveda and Integrated
Medical Sciences**

www.jaims.in

JAIMS

An International Journal for Researches in Ayurveda and Allied Sciences



Charaka
Publications

Indexed

Role of *Abhyanga* in Skin and Hair Care

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ABSTRACT

Skin is the first presenting organ of the body. Healthy and lustrous hair symbolizes the inner health of the individual. When you look good, you feel good is the general psychology. There are numerous external beauty therapies cropping up in the arcade of beauty. But a simple, user-friendly and cost-effective therapy described in ancient Ayurvedic texts, *Abhyanga* beautifies skin and hair from the inner core, in a healthy way, which is the purpose of this study. The references regarding *Abhyanga*, skin and hair from all the Ayurvedic texts were assembled and assessed. Also the role of *Abhyanga* in maintaining the definition of 'Swastha Purusha' was explored. *Abhyanga* leads to *Vata-Shaman* and *Prabha-Vardhan* thereby acting as an excellent anti-ageing therapy. It also takes care of certain ailments like pain, tingling, numbness etc. It also helps in improving blood circulation, removal of toxins, thus imparting strength to skin and care. Inclusively, *Abhyanga* can be considered as an excellent therapy for the enhancement of health and beauty.

Key words: *Abhyanga*, Skin care, Hair care.

INTRODUCTION

Beauty is the attribution of a property or quality of an animal, idea, object, person or place that provides a perception of pleasure or satisfaction. Human beauty is largely a reflection of the quality of skin, hair, eyes, feet and so on. It is also an expression of healthy skin and healthy hair. Ayurveda is a lifestyle science which endeavors towards preserving health and prevention and treatment of diseases. So beauty in Ayurveda concepts is appreciated in terms of health. Hence a direct reference of the word 'beauty' is not found in *Samhita Granthas*. Instead words like 'Saukumarya',

'Kanti', 'Prabha', 'Prasanna' etc. are used to describe beauty. The path towards health and beauty starts with *Dinacharya* and *Rutucharya* i.e. daily and seasonal regimen. Of the various regimes described for *Dinacharya*, one is *Abhyanga*. It is an oil massage involving warm medicinal oils individual to one's *Prakruti*. It opens up the channels (*Srotas*), removes toxins, provides nutrition and moisturises hair and skin. It provides all the long term and short term benefits of facial and hair therapy done in salons in an affordable way.

AIM

To evaluate the role of *Abhyanga* in skin and hair care

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the mode of action of *Abhyanga*
2. To evaluate the role of *Abhyanga* in skin care
3. To evaluate the role of *Abhyanga* in hair care
4. To define *Abhyanga* as a beauty enhancer

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Various Ayurvedic classics and published research articles were reviewed and studied to evaluate the role of *Abhyanga* in skin and hair care.

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Submission Date: 09/07/2020 Accepted Date: 12/08/2020

Access this article online

Quick Response Code



Website: www.jaims.in

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Concept of beauty in Ayurveda

A phrase in English goes 'Beauty is only skin deep', which means someone may have a beautiful appearance but not necessarily beautiful character. Putting this in the terms of Ayurveda, this phrase seems incorrect. Beauty is mostly appreciated through eyes, skin, hair and physique and built of the body. In Ayurveda, these qualities are discussed in context of *Prakruti*, *Saar*, *Saarvan Dhatus* etc. The skin of a *Ras-Saar* person is lusturous and smooth. The body hair is soft, less dense and deeply rooted. The skin of *Rakta-Saar* person is described as *Shri-mad-Bhrajishnu*, which means delicate and lusturous skin. The texture of skin and hair in a *Meda-Saar* person is smooth and soft. *Majja Saar* persons have large and attractive eyes and soft complexion. A *Sukra-Saar* person has attractive eyes, white, dense teeth and lusturous complexion.^[1] Ayurveda, being more of a medical science, focuses majorly on the inner beauty obtained through good health.

Concept of skin in Ayurveda

According to *Aacharya Sushruta*, the amalgamation of *Shukra* and *Shonita* while being acted upon by *Agni*, gives rise to the formation of seven layers of the skin. The example of formation of cream when the milk is boiled is cited to explain this process.^[2]

Aacharya Vagbhat has quoted the same example. But according to him, blood (*Rakta Dhatu*) when processed upon by its own agni helps in formation of the seven layers of the skin.^[3] *Shashilekha* commentary on *Ashtang Sangraha* mentions that the layers of skin are like the layers of the flower of banana. The quality of the *Rakta Dhatu* is reflected from the quality of skin.^[4]

Ashtanga Sangraha has mentioned skin as a '*Maatruja*' organ.^[5] *Aacharya Charaka* has also mentioned skin as a '*Maatruja*' organ.^[6] The organs which are described as '*Maatruja*' are derived from the maternal part and are soft and delicate in nature.

Layers of skin

Charaka Samhita and *Ashtanga Sangraha* has described 6 layers of skin^[7] whereas *Ashtang Hridaya*

and *Sushruta Samhita* has mentioned 7 layers of skin.^[8]

6 layers of skin according to *Charak Samhita*^[7]

1. Outermost layer of skin is '*Udakadhara*', the one which holds water.
2. Second is '*Asrugdhara*', the one which holds blood.
3. Third layer is the seat of *Sidhma* and *Kilasa*.
4. Fourth layer is the seat of *Dadru* and *Kushtha*
5. Fifth layer is the seat of *Alaji* and *Vidradhi*
6. Sixth layer, if cut, causes *tam-pravesh* (or loss of consciousness) and seat of blackish or reddish boils, deep-rooted on joints and incurable.

Ashtang Sangraha has also mentioned these layers of skin. The sixth layer has been named *Pranadhara* by *Aacharya Vagbhat*.^[9]

7 layers of skin according to *Aacharya Sushruta*^[10]

Name of the layer	Thickness	Diseases related
<i>Avabhasini</i>	1/18 th of the thickness of <i>Brihi</i>	<i>Sidhma, Padmakantaka</i>
<i>Lohita</i>	1/16 th of the thickness of <i>Brihi</i>	<i>Tilkalak, Nyachh, Vyanga</i>
<i>Shweta</i>	1/12 th of the thickness of <i>Brihi</i>	<i>Charmadal, Ajagalii, Mashak</i>
<i>Tamra</i>	1/8 th of the thickness of <i>Brihi</i>	<i>Kilaas, Kushtha</i>
<i>Vedini</i>	1/5 th of the thickness of <i>Brihi</i>	<i>Kushtha, Visarpa</i>
<i>Rohini</i>	Same as thickness of <i>Brihi</i>	<i>Apachi, Tumour, Filariasis, Abcess Galgand</i>

Mamsadhara	Twice the thickness of Brihi	Fistula, Abscess, Haemorrhoids
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Concept of hair in Ayurved

Hair is a *Pitruja-Avayava*.^[11] It mainly comprises of *Prithvi-Mahabhoota*. It is formed as a *Mala* of *Asthi-Dhatu*.^[12]

The scalp is called the *Kesh-Bhumi*, ie the place of origin of hair. According to Aacharya Kashyap, the scalp should be *Snigdha*, having good amount of blood supply, devoid of any disorders or wounds.^[13]

The hair of *Pitta-Prakruti* individual are soft, less dense, slightly brownish in colour.^[14] *Vaat-Prakruti* individuals have rough and weak hair. *Pitta-Prakruti* individuals develop the signs of aging like prematures greying of hair, hairfall and wrinkling of skin earlier.^[14]

Hairfall is a symptom present in *Asthi-Kshaya*.^[15] *Kesh-bhumi-sputana* is one of the 80 diseases occurring due to *Vat-Dushti*.^[16]

Abhyanga or oil massage

Abhyanga is a form of massage where medicated oils are infused into the skin or scalp. It is described as a part of daily routine by Ayurveda. It is used as an individual therapy and also as a *Poorva-Karma* in *Panchkarma*. It removes the toxins and increases blood circulation of the specific area.

According to *Aacharya Vagbhat*, *Abhyanga* should be practised regularly. It keeps away the signs of aging (pre-mature aging), fatigue and symptoms arising due to *Vaat-Vridhhi*. It helps to improve the vision, improves the health of eyes, beautifies and strengthens the skin as well as imparts a peaceful sleep.^[17] Along with entire body, *Abhyanga* should be done mainly on head (scalp and hair), ears and feet.^[18]

Three examples namely; the wheels, skin from dead animals and earthen pot are illustrated in *Ashtang Sangraha* to explain the benefits of *Abhyanga*. These three when regularly rubbed upon by oil become soft and strong. Likewise when the skin is regularly nourished with oil it becomes soft, subtle, elastic and strong. The *Vaat-Dosha* takes the abode (*Ashraya*) of the skin and performs its function of recognising

touch and sensations. Oil is the unsurpassed medicine for maintaining the proper functioning of *Vaayu*. Hence oil massage is extremely important for the skin.^[19] *Aacharya Charak* adds that the body becomes exceptionally strong, capable of lifting heavy weights and youthful by regular oil massage.^[20] *Aacharya Sushruta* also advocates the same regarding *Abhyanga*. He also states that the body becomes strong, toxin-free, *Dhatu*s become nourished and *Kapha* and *Vaata Dosha* are maintained in their proper proportion. Further he adds that the time period required for the oil to reach the roots of hair is 300 *Matras*, skin 400 *Matras*, blood 500 *Matras*, muscles 600 *Matras*, *Meda Dhatu* 700 *Matras*, bones 800 *Matras* and 900 *Matras* to reach the bone marrow and destroy various diseases.^[21]

Oil is mentioned as the one which destroys increased *Vaat-Dosha* without increasing *Kapha-Dosha*. It is said to be beneficial to the skin and imparting strength to it.^[22] The person who is desirous of subtle, soft, smooth skin and strong, active, muscular and stable body should use oil application regularly.^[23] Oil is the best medicine for increased *Vaat-Dosha* imparting strength, beneficial to skin and increasing the brain power.^[24]

Padabhyanga or foot massage

Padabhyanga relieves the feet of roughness, numbness, dryness and fatigue immediately. It also promotes the beauty, strength and power of the feet. It also helps to improve the health of the eyes and maintains the *Vaat-Dosha* in its proper limits. It also takes care of ailments like cracked feet, sciatica and other nerve disorders. Muscle cramps also decrease by regular foot-massage.^[25] It also helps to obtain a peaceful sleep.^[26]

Aacharya Sushruta has explained continuous travelling on foot due to which the dryness in the *Vaat-Dosha* increases, give rise to cracked feet or *Pad-Daari*.^[27] The treatment for the same is specified as *Sira-Vedha*, *Swedan*, *Abhyanga* and *Lepa-Chikitsa*.

Shiro-Abhyanga or head massage

Acharya Charak explains that a person having regular head massage does not experience headache.

Premature greying of hair, hairfall, disorders of hair does not occur with head massage. The hair becomes strong, long and black. The sense organs become well-nourished and the facial skin becomes lusturous. Deep and peaceful sleep is experienced by regular head massage.^[28] *Aacharya Vagbhat* promotes four types of applying oil to the head, namely, *Abhyanga*, *Sek*, *Pichu* and *Shirobasti*. Their benefits go on increasing from *Abhyanga* to *Shirobasti*. *Abhyanga* relieves the hair and scalp of dryness, itching and impurities. *Seka* helps in dandruff, headache, burning sensation and scalp wounds. *Sneha-pichu* helps in diseases related to scalp and disorders of the eyes. *Shiro-basti* relieves numbness, insomnia, vision disturbances and other severe diseases related to supra-clavicle region.^[29]

Indralupta and *Khalitya* are the diseases in which the pores of hair roots get blocked by *Pitta* and *Vaat*.^[30] The treatment for the same is given as *Sira-Vedha* followed by *Abhyanga*.^[31]

Darunak occurs at the scalp level where the scalp is severely damaged by dryness due to *Vaata* and itching due to *Kapha*.^[32] *Avapeeda*, *Shirobasti* and *Abhyanga* are the therapies advocated for this disease.^[33]

Palitya is described as a disease caused by the damage of the scalp due to *Vaata* and *Pitta*.^[34] Its treatment includes *Nasya* and *Abhyanga*.

Properties of oil

Predominantly oil is used for *Abhyanga*. The qualities of oil or *Taila*, which is one of the four important *Snehan Dravyas*, are very well explained in the *Samhitas*. *Aacharya Charak* and *Sushruta* has mentioned oil as *Twachya*- beneficial to the skin.^[35] Conversely in *Ashtang Hridaya* it is mentioned that oil is *Twak-Dosha-Krut* harmful to the skin. But it is explained in *Ayurveda Rasayan* commentary that oral consumption of oil in excess is detrimental to the skin but if oil is used for massage it is favorable to the skin.^[36]

Properties of individual oils

Sesame oil is *Sukshma* and beneficial to the skin if used as external application.^[37] Sesame oil has low

molecular weight and hence it is considered as the best oil to infiltrate in the skin. Sesame oil has antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties. It is said to have natural sunscreen properties. It is rich in Vit A, E and B. According to *Ashtang Hridaya*, sesame oil is beneficial in obesity as well as emaciation.

Mustard oil is useful in all types of skin diseases, internal and external worm infestations and wound healing.^[38] Mustard oil is rich in Vit E and Omega-3 fatty acids. It also acts as an antibacterial and antifungal agent. It helps healing skin allergies, rashes and infections, reduces wrinkles on skin thus promoting anti-aging. It increases blood circulation to skin and scalp thus promoting hair growth.

Oil obtained from *Bibhitaka* is beneficial for the healthy growth of hair.^[38] It prevents premature graying of hair, heals dandruff and lice infestation thus boosting hair growth. It is also useful in skin allergies, acne and wound healing.

Neem oil is helpful in skin disease, worm infestations and symptoms like itching, secretions produced due to vitiated *kapha*.^[38] It is a well known antifungal medicine thus helping to cure dandruff. It alleviates dryness and itching. It helps healing wounds and fades the dark spots of acne. Being rich in Vit-E and fatty acids, it improves the elasticity of skin.

Ashtang Sangraha has mentioned many oils like *Karanja*, *Shigru*, *Mulak*, *Agaru*, *Devdaru*, *Tuvarak*, *Bibhitak* as beneficial in skin disease and worm infestations.^[39]

Oils of plants like *Bibhitaka*, walnut, coconut, *Trapusha*, *Moha*, *Priyaal* are beneficial for the growth of hair.^[40]

Almond oil gives strength and lusture to the hair. It reduces infection and inflammation of the skin as well as scalp. It facilitates skin lightening and tan removal. It heals chapped lips, wrinkles and cracked heels.

Walnut oil is an excellent source of Omega-3 fatty acids. It is also an antiseptic and antimicrobial. It has rejuvenation and regeneration properties due to which it promotes hair growth. It also helps in skin toning and anti-aging process.

OBSERVATIONS

1. Skin or *Twak* is an organ developed from maternal factors and hair develops from paternal factor. Maternal factor develops from mainly *Jala-Mahabhoota* and paternal factor develops mainly from *Prithvi Mahabhoota*. Oil massage or *Abhyanga* nourishes both these *Mahabhootas* by its *Snigdha* and *Sthira* qualities.
2. *Vaat-Dosha* resides in the abode of skin. Hair is the *Mala* of *Asthi-Dhatu*. Hence any imbalance in *Vaat Dosha* impairs the health of skin and hair. Oil is the choice of medicine for maintaining the natural health of skin and hair.
3. *Sushruta-Samhita* is a surgery pre-dominant text. As it is more focused on the anatomical aspects of the body, it has explained the time period required for the oil to reach each *Dhatu* from superficial to deep.
4. The diseases mentioned in relation to skin and hair are mostly caused due to imbalance of *Pitta* and *Vaata*. *Abhyanga* helps to restore this imbalance.
5. *Ashtang Hridaya* has proposed levels in the oil therapy for various ailments, like *Abhyanga*, *Sek*, *Pichu* and *Shiro-Basti*. These therapies can be incorporated in the treatments of various diseases cropping up today due to the modern lifestyle.

DISCUSSION

Beauty cannot reside inside a diseased body and mind. So the most important component of beauty is good health, which can only be achieved by maintaining a discipline in daily routine. These practices like *Abhyanga* are not limited only to certain festive rituals, but have to be an unavoidable part of our schedule.

The action of *Abhyanga* can be basically explained in two mechanisms;

Mechanism of action of oil massage on skin and hair:

- **Relaxation action:** Massage increases the levels of Serotonin and Dopamine which are mood-lifter

hormones. Cortisol hormone, which increases stress levels, decreases. Decrease in stress and anxiety levels improves the quality of sleep. Massaging relieves the body of physical and mental fatigue.

- **Mechanical action:** Massaging dilates the small blood vessels thus increasing blood circulation. Due to this oxygen supply to the cells increase thereby promoting the nourishment to the tissues. It also opens the pores of the skin thus enhancing the transport of nutrients to the tissues. The rubbing action clears the skin and scalp off dead cell layer, eg. Dandruff. This also exposes the newer cells to nourishment. The lymphatic drainage improves facilitating the removal of toxins. Due to the unctuous nature of oil, the hair and skin are conditioned. It also prevents the skin and hair of infestations and infections by maintaining their health.

Ayurveda defines a healthy individual as the one who has the proper balance of the three *Doshas*, has good digestive power, the balanced functioning of the seven *Dhatu*s and three *Malas*. Along with these factors, content and peaceful soul, sense organs and mind are very much a part of a healthy individual. (Shu.Su.15/41)

Abhyanga plays a major role in maintaining the overall health of the individual by balancing and nourishing the functional units of the body - the *Dosha*, *Dhatu*s and *Malas*. By promoting a good sleep and relieving stress it takes care of the mental health of the individual. When a person is healthy and happy physically as well as mentally, it reflects upon the aura of the individual. Thus *Abhyanga* can be termed as a beauty enhancer.

Absorption of oils in skin and scalp

The skin is permeable to fat soluble substances. When oil is applied to the skin, the oil molecules pass through the stratum corneum, dermis, capillaries and finally the blood stream. Hair follicles and sweat ducts also help in absorption of oil molecules. The process of *Abhyanga* or massage increases blood circulation and warmth of the skin. As the blood

circulation towards the skin increases, the skin's permeability to oils increases. The warm oil used in *Abhyanga* opens the pores of the skin. Clean and open skin pores improves absorption of oil molecules. Also rubbing the oil exfoliates the skin to remove the dry cells and debris. The absorption also depends on time duration of contact. It takes approximately 30 minutes for the oil to be absorbed into the skin which is fairly the time taken for process of *Abhyanga*. The thickness of the skin also matters in oil absorption. But oil is best absorbed in soles of feet, palms and face.

Oils are extremely essential for maintaining the health of hair. Some oils penetrate the hair follicles and due to its hydrophobic nature lessen the water absorbed in the hair. It enhances lubrication of the hair follicle, improves elasticity thus preventing hair damage. Regular use of oil massage to scalp reduces the protein loss from the hair. The lubrication effect reduces friction and prevents damage of hair to unwanted abrasions.^[41]

CONCLUSION

Abhyanga acts on a physical as well as mental and psychological level to create a sense of well-being. *Abhyanga* imparts strength, softness, durability and lustre to the skin and hair, which are the significant aspects in defining the beauty of an individual. *Abhyanga* imparts beauty with health in an individual. *Abhyanga* delays the occurrence of aging signs and promotes a graceful aging process. Overall, *Abhyanga* can be defined as a beauty enhancer.

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How to cite this article: Dr. Madhuri Anil Pachghare, Vd. Priya Vishal Naik. Role of Abhyanga in Skin and Hair Care. J Ayurveda Integr Med Sci 2020;4:169-176.

Source of Support: Nil, **Conflict of Interest:** None declared.

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