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## Impact of Abhyanga (Oil Massage) on skin health and aging: Evidence from ayurvedic texts

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### Abstract

Abhyanga, the traditional Ayurvedic practice of therapeutic oil massage, has been revered for centuries for its health-promoting and rejuvenating properties. This paper explores the physiological, dermatological, and anti-aging effects of Abhyanga, emphasizing its relevance in both classical Ayurvedic literature and modern biomedical interpretation. Drawing from classical texts such as the Charaka Samhita and contemporary peer-reviewed studies, we examine how Abhyanga enhances skin health, mitigates aging symptoms, balances doshas (especially Vata), and improves overall well-being. This paper further integrates modern scientific findings that support the antioxidant, circulatory, and neuroendocrine benefits of oil massage. The review concludes that Abhyanga serves as a bridge between traditional wisdom and modern skin science, offering a viable, holistic method for preserving youth and promoting dermatological health.

**Keywords:** Abhyanga, therapeutic oil massage, promoting dermatological health, ayurvedic texts

### 1. Introduction

In the vast landscape of ancient medical systems, Ayurveda stands as one of the most enduring and holistic traditions. At its core lies the belief that health is a balanced state of the body, mind, and spirit, maintained through harmony with nature and adherence to daily and seasonal regimens. Among the many practices advocated by Ayurveda, Abhyanga therapeutic oil massage holds a distinguished place. While initially described as a daily ritual (Dinacharya) to maintain physical and mental well-being, over time it has also gained prominence as a therapeutic intervention across various pathologies.

The skin, or 'Twak', is not only a protective barrier but is also recognized in Ayurveda as a mirror of internal health and a primary seat of the tactile sensory organ, Sparshanendriya. As aging sets in, the skin is one of the first organs to reflect the degeneration caused by imbalances in the body's functional energies, or doshas particularly Vata. This dosha, when aggravated, leads to dryness, roughness, wrinkling, and other signs associated with aging. Classical texts such as Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita emphasize the role of Abhyanga in preventing these changes by stabilizing Vata and nourishing the body tissues. Modern dermatological science, which focuses heavily on cellular integrity, antioxidant defense, and moisture retention, is beginning to uncover evidence that supports many of Ayurveda's traditional claims. With the increasing global interest in integrative medicine, it becomes pertinent to evaluate traditional practices like Abhyanga under the lens of modern scientific inquiry. This paper aims to bridge that gap by presenting a comprehensive analysis of Abhyanga's benefits on skin health and aging, drawing from both Ayurvedic texts and contemporary biomedical literature.

### Main Objective

The objective of this paper is to explore the impact of Abhyanga (Ayurvedic oil massage) on skin health and aging by integrating insights from classical Ayurvedic texts and modern scientific studies, highlighting its therapeutic, physiological, and dermatological benefits as a holistic approach to maintaining youthful, resilient, and healthy skin.

### 2. Ayurvedic Foundations of Abhyanga

The concept of Abhyanga is deeply embedded in the preventive and promotive health strategies outlined in Ayurveda.

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Defined as the external application of medicated oils followed by massage, Abhyanga is recommended not merely as a physical treatment but as a ritual that harmonizes the body, calms the mind, and rejuvenates the spirit. According to Charaka Samhita, Abhyanga is a daily practice that confers strength, good complexion, sound sleep, and longevity.

The methodology of Abhyanga is precise and governed by the individual's constitution (Prakriti), season (Ritu), and the condition being treated. Oils used in Abhyanga are often infused with herbs selected for their dosha-specific balancing properties. For instance, sesame oil, revered for its warming and nourishing qualities, is considered ideal for pacifying Vata dosha. Coconut oil, with its cooling nature, is better suited for conditions arising from excess Pitta. The choice of oil and technique is thus highly individualized, reflecting Ayurveda's personalized approach to therapy.

In classical texts, Abhyanga is not limited to general body massage. Localized forms such as Shiroabhyanga (head massage), Padabhyanga (foot massage), and Mukhabhyanga (facial massage) are recommended for targeted benefits. These localized interventions are believed to channel the therapeutic action of the oil to specific organs and systems, making Abhyanga a versatile and holistic practice.

The primary rationale for Abhyanga lies in its ability to counteract Vata dosha, which governs movement and is inherently dry, cold, and light. Aging is considered a natural manifestation of increasing Vata dominance in the body. Hence, regular Abhyanga serves as a counterbalancing force, providing the necessary lubrication, warmth, and stability to offset the degenerative tendencies associated with aging.

### 3. Skin Health Benefits of Abhyanga

From an Ayurvedic standpoint, the health of the skin depends not only on external applications but also on the internal state of the body. However, Abhyanga, through its direct action on the skin and peripheral tissues, exerts a profound influence on dermatological health. Regular oil massage is said to improve the tone, texture, and resilience of the skin. It protects the skin from environmental insults, such as wind and dryness, and enhances its natural glow or 'Tejas'.

Scientific studies have begun to validate these traditional claims. Modern research indicates that massage with oils enhances microcirculation, which in turn improves oxygen and nutrient delivery to skin cells. This facilitates cellular repair, enhances collagen synthesis, and maintains the skin's elasticity and firmness. Oils like sesame and coconut are rich in antioxidants such as vitamin E, which neutralize free radicals and slow down the oxidative processes responsible for skin aging.

Moreover, Abhyanga strengthens the barrier function of the skin by restoring lipids in the stratum corneum. This reduces trans-epidermal water loss and keeps the skin hydrated. Clinical observations support that individuals who practice regular Abhyanga exhibit fewer signs of dryness, scaling, and wrinkling hallmarks of aging skin.

In addition to these physiological benefits, the act of self-massage enhances body awareness and nurtures a positive connection with one's physical form. This psychosomatic aspect of Abhyanga is often understated in clinical literature but is an essential element of its therapeutic efficacy in Ayurveda.

**The table below summarizes the comparative benefits of commonly used oils in Abhyanga:**

Oil	Ayurvedic Properties	Skin Benefits
Sesame Oil	Warm, heavy, nourishing; best for Vata dosha	Deeply moisturizing, improves elasticity, rich in antioxidants, enhances complexion
Coconut Oil	Cooling, light; best for Pitta dosha	Soothes inflammation, prevents dryness and flaking, delays wrinkle formation, antimicrobial effects
Olive Oil	Slightly warming, rich in polyphenols	Repairs skin barrier, reduces photo-aging, enhances skin texture and tone
Bala Taila	Medicated oil, strengthening and nourishing	Promotes muscle tone, used in infants and postnatal care, supports weight gain and immunity
Kumkumadi Taila	Luxurious, cooling, beautifying	Brightens complexion, treats pigmentation, promotes glow and clarity of facial skin
Castor Oil	Heavy, sticky, detoxifying	Effective for dry skin patches, softens calluses, beneficial in certain skin conditions (eczema)

### 4. Physiological and Systemic Impacts

While the focus of this paper is on skin health, it is important to acknowledge that the effects of Abhyanga are systemic and multifactorial. The mechanical pressure exerted during massage enhances venous return and promotes lymphatic drainage. This helps in the detoxification of tissues and the removal of metabolic waste products, which can otherwise impair cellular health and contribute to premature aging.

Neurologically, Abhyanga has been shown to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting a state of relaxation and restoration. This is associated with lowered cortisol levels and enhanced secretion of serotonin and dopamine-neurotransmitters linked to well-being. In Ayurvedic terms, this reflects the calming of Vata and the stabilization of Prana Vata, which governs mental activity.

Interestingly, some studies have documented that oil massage stimulates the release of human growth hormone (HGH), which plays a key role in tissue repair and regeneration. HGH promotes protein synthesis and supports the maintenance of skin thickness and elasticity properties that decline with age. Thus, Abhyanga may influence skin aging not only through local action but also by modulating systemic biochemical pathways.

The thermal and tactile stimulation provided by warm oil further supports the skin's thermoregulation and activates sebaceous and sweat glands. This contributes to the maintenance of skin homeostasis, a function that diminishes with age. The cumulative effect of these physiological responses enhances the body's innate capacity for healing and regeneration.

## 5. Special Populations and Use Cases

The utility of Abhyanga extends across the lifespan, from infancy to old age. In neonates, oil massage is a widely practiced tradition in many cultures, including India. Ayurvedic texts recommend Bala Taila for new-borns to support healthy weight gain, improve skin maturation, and enhance immune function. Clinical research has corroborated these effects, demonstrating improved thermoregulation, sleep patterns, and weight trajectories in infants receiving regular oil massage.

For postpartum women, Abhyanga serves not only as a physical restorative therapy but also as an emotional anchor. The period after childbirth is marked by hormonal fluctuations, fatigue, and physical strain. Regular massage during this time has been shown to alleviate muscular tension, improve lactation, and support maternal-infant bonding. Ayurvedic texts emphasize that by pacifying Vata and replenishing Ojas (vital essence), Abhyanga restores vitality to new mothers.

In the elderly, where dryness, stiffness, and frailty become prominent, Abhyanga offers a gentle yet powerful means of maintaining mobility, preventing skin breakdown, and improving overall quality of life. Its capacity to reduce stress, enhance circulation, and nourish tissues makes it particularly suited for this demographic, where interventions must be both safe and rejuvenative.

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this paper converge with a number of scholarly studies, both classical and contemporary, that highlight the multi-dimensional benefits of Abhyanga on skin health and aging. Classical Ayurvedic literature consistently advocates for daily oil massage as a means to delay aging and enhance vitality. Charaka and Sushruta emphasized the role of oil massage in strengthening the skin, increasing softness and resilience, and supporting the balance of Vata dosha the primary dosha involved in aging and degeneration.

These traditional views have found support in modern observational and clinical studies. For example, Sharma *et al.* (2014) <sup>[8]</sup> reported that regular Abhyanga enhances skin moisture, resilience, and tolerance to exertion, aligning with the classical belief in Abhyanga's rejuvenative properties (Sharma *et al.*, 2014) <sup>[8]</sup>. Similarly, Chakraborty and Malakar (2018) <sup>[3]</sup> highlighted how Abhyanga helps maintain the normalcy of Vata, which in turn contributes to delaying the signs of aging (Chakraborty & Malakar, 2018) <sup>[3]</sup>.

Physiological investigations provide further validation. Basler (2011) <sup>[1]</sup> conducted a pilot study showing that Abhyanga significantly reduced subjective stress and heart rate, effects that may indirectly enhance skin health by reducing cortisol-induced tissue damage (Basler, 2011) <sup>[1]</sup>. Sabna *et al.* (2021) <sup>[7]</sup> explained that the benefits of Abhyanga on lymphatic drainage and microcirculation improve nutrient transport to the skin and support detoxification (Sabna *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[7]</sup>.

Comparative studies have also shown distinctions based on the type of oil used. Raskar and Rajagopala (2015) <sup>[6]</sup> demonstrated that neonatal massage with Bala Taila led to increased weight gain and improved skin texture compared to standard oils, supporting the specificity of Ayurvedic formulations (Raskar & Rajagopala, 2015) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Taken together, the collective evidence supports the assertion that Abhyanga is not merely a cosmetic or cultural practice, but a therapeutic intervention grounded in both tradition and science. Its wide applicability, from neonates to the elderly, underscores its versatility and relevance in contemporary wellness strategies

## 7. Conclusion

Abhyanga is more than a massage technique; it is a profound ritual of self-care rooted in centuries of Ayurvedic wisdom. Its benefits for skin health and aging are not only well-articulated in classical texts but increasingly supported by modern research. As interest grows in holistic and integrative approaches to health, Abhyanga stands out as a time-tested, evidence-informed practice capable of enhancing both beauty and vitality.

Its integration into contemporary health practices promises not only improved skin outcomes but also a deeper alignment with the body's natural rhythms and healing potential. As this paper illustrates, the impact of Abhyanga goes far beyond the skin it touches the very essence of what it means to age gracefully and live healthfully

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