



Review Article

## GERIATRIC WELLNESS THROUGH ABHYANGA: AN AYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVE ON HEALTHY AGING

Gunjan Garg<sup>1</sup>, Gopesh Mangal<sup>2</sup>, Nisha Bhoi<sup>3\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Professor and HOD, Dept. of Swasthavritta and Yoga, MJF Ayurveda College, Chomu, Rajasthan.

<sup>2</sup>Professor and HOD, <sup>3</sup>PG Scholar, Dept. of Panchakarma, NIA, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

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### ABSTRACT

Aging is characterized by a gradual decline in physiological efficiency, resulting in reduced functional capacity and increased vulnerability to chronic disorders. Healthy aging refers to the maintenance of functional capacity and improvement of the quality of life in older adults. Ayurveda, the traditional Indian system of medicine, prescribes healthcare and lifestyle modification that support longevity and overall well-being. Among these practices, *Abhyanga* (therapeutic oil massage) is regarded as an essential component of *Dinacharya*. The present review aims to evaluate the role of *Abhyanga* in promoting healthy aging based on classical Ayurvedic concepts and present-day scientific evidence. *Abhyanga* is described in Ayurveda as a practice that nourishes *Dhatus*, pacifies *Vata Dosh*, and promotes strength and vitality. Present studies on massage therapy indicate improvements in skin health, joint mobility, autonomic regulation, and overall physiological function. These findings are consistent with classical Ayurvedic principles. *Abhyanga* may serve as a safe, economical, and practical approach for promoting healthy aging. Further well-designed clinical studies are required to establish standardized protocols and strengthen evidence for its application in geriatric care.

### INTRODUCTION

Aging is an inevitable biological process marked by gradual physiological deterioration and an increased risk of disease.<sup>[1,2]</sup> In modern biomedical science, aging involves progressive structural and functional changes at the cellular and molecular levels.

In Ayurveda, aging is described by the term *Jara*, which refers to the natural process of degeneration occurring in the body over time.<sup>[3]</sup> *Jara* represents the later stages of life and is described in Ayurvedic literature as a natural and inevitable phenomenon (*Swabhavaja*).<sup>[4]</sup> Classical texts such as the *Charaka Samhita* and *Ashtanga Hridaya* describe this phase as predominantly influenced by *Vata Dosh*<sup>[5]</sup>, which manifests through dryness, reduced tissue integrity, diminished strength, and functional decline.

These changes reflect the progressive decline in *Dhatu*, *Bala*, *Indriya*, and *Ojas*. Therefore, Ayurvedic preventive approaches focus on maintaining the equilibrium of *Doshas*, nourishing the *Dhatus*, and preserving vitality through lifestyle regulation and therapeutic practices.<sup>[6]</sup> Generally, *Tila Taila* (sesame oil) is regarded as suitable for all types of *Prakruti* (body constitutions), as Ayurveda considers it a superior oil among all *Tailas*.<sup>[7]</sup> It possesses *Tridoshaghna* properties, meaning it helps pacify all three *Doshas* while providing nourishment to the body.

Among the daily health-promoting practices recommended in Ayurveda, *Abhyanga* (oil massage) occupies a particularly important position. It is described as a therapeutic procedure involving the systematic application of warm medicated oils over the body. This practice enhances bodily strength, improves circulation, alleviates fatigue, and supports overall health. The objective of this review is to analyze the classical Ayurvedic concept of *Abhyanga* and evaluate its potential contribution to healthy aging from both traditional and contemporary scientific perspectives.

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## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This narrative review was conducted through the study of classical Ayurvedic texts, including *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and *Ashtanga Hridaya*, to understand the concept of Abhyanga in the context of aging. Relevant modern scientific literature was retrieved from research articles using keywords related to “Abhyanga,” “massage therapy,” “healthy aging,” “geriatric,” and “Ayurveda”. Classical references were analyzed to interpret traditional concepts, while modern studies were reviewed to explore the possible physiological mechanisms and clinical relevance. Studies published in English that focused on massage therapy and geriatric health were considered for inclusion, while duplicate and irrelevant studies were excluded.

### Concept of Abhyanga in Ayurveda

*Abhyanga* involves the application of oil or unctuous substances over the body with gentle massage movements.

A classical verse from the *Ashtanga Hridaya* states:<sup>[8]</sup>

“अभ्यङ्गमाचरेन्नित्यं स जराश्रमवातहा।

दृष्टिप्रसादपुष्ट्यायुःस्वप्नसुत्वक्त्वदाढ्यकृत् ॥”

This highlights that *Abhyanga* is not only a therapeutic procedure but also a preventive daily practice in Ayurveda.

- Delaying aging (*Jarahara*)
- Relieving fatigue (*Shramahara*)
- Pacifying *Vata Dosha*
- Improving vision
- Promoting sound sleep
- Enhancing skin health
- Increasing strength and longevity

*Acharya Charaka* compares the human body to a wooden wheel that becomes stronger and more durable when properly lubricated with oil, which helps to prevent friction and damage. In a similar way, the practice of *Abhyanga* nourishes the body and helps protect it from wear and tear, thereby reducing degenerative changes.<sup>[9]</sup>

### Mechanism of Action of Abhyanga

#### Ayurvedic Perspective

According to Ayurvedic principles, the oils used in *Abhyanga* possess *Snigdha* (unctuous) and *Ushna* (warm) qualities. These properties effectively counteract the *Ruksha* (dry) and *Sheeta* (cold) qualities of *Vata Dosha*.<sup>[10]</sup> In this way, *Abhyanga* supports *Dosha* balance and helps maintain physiological stability. Additionally, it stimulates *Bhrajak Pitta*, which is responsible for absorbing the applied oil through the skin and metabolizing it to generate energy that supports the body.<sup>[11]</sup>

From the Ayurvedic perspective, the effects of *Abhyanga* can be understood through several mechanisms:

- *Vata Shamana*: Helps to reduce dryness and instability associated with *Vata Dosha*.
- *Dhatu Poshan*: Oils penetrate through the skin channels (*Srotas*) and provide nourishment to bodily tissues.
- Improved Circulation: Massage movements enhance blood flow and facilitate better tissue nourishment.
- Enhancement of *Ojas*: Regular practice contributes to improved vitality, immunity, and overall strength.
- According to *Charaka*, *Vayu* predominates in the *Sparshanendriya* (sense of touch), and its *Adhishthana* (seat) is *Tvacha* (skin). As *Abhyanga* is beneficial for maintaining the health and nourishment of the skin, it is recommended to practice it regularly.<sup>[12]</sup> Since all the *Indriyas* (sense organs) are closely connected with the mind, the proper functioning of healthy *Indriyas* supports mental well-being. Therefore, the regular practice of *Abhyanga* helps in maintaining both physical and mental health.

### Absorption Through the Skin

During *Abhyanga*, the applied oil gradually penetrates through the hair follicles and superficial layers of the skin. This absorption process allows the oil to reach deeper tissues and potentially enter systemic circulation.

As a result, the nourishing effects of oil massage extend to multiple *Dhatu*s, including:

- *Twak*
- *Rakta*
- *Mamsa*
- *Meda*
- *Asthi*
- *Majja*

This process contributes to improved tissue nourishment and physiological stability.

### Modern Physiological Perspective

Modern research on massage therapy describes several physiological mechanisms that may explain the beneficial effects observed with *Abhyanga*. According to modern physiology, massage or therapeutic touch has been observed to stimulate an increase in the secretion of growth hormone.<sup>[13]</sup> The mechanical stimulation produced during *Abhyanga* enhances local circulation, thereby facilitating improved oxygenation and nutrient delivery to tissues.

Massage activates cutaneous mechanical receptors. These influence the autonomic nervous system, reducing sympathetic activity and enhancing

parasympathetic responses. As a result, stress hormone levels decrease, promoting relaxation and improved sleep quality. In addition, massage therapy contributes to improved muscle flexibility, reduced joint stiffness, and enhanced neuromuscular function. Due to the reduced mobility in elderly individuals, these effects are especially relevant in this age group. These responses improve physical function and help to reduce age-related degenerative changes.

### Role of *Abhyanga* in Healthy Aging

#### Pacification of *Vata Dosh*

Aging in Ayurveda is primarily associated with *Vata* predominance, which results in dryness, degeneration, and loss of tissue strength. The *Snigdha* and *Ushna* qualities of oils used in *Abhyanga* help counteract these changes, support physiological balance, and slow degenerative processes.

#### Skin Health

With advancing age, the skin undergoes structural changes such as reduced collagen production, decreased hydration, and diminished elasticity, which contribute to the formation of wrinkles and dryness.<sup>[14]</sup> By improving hydration and elasticity, regular oil massage helps maintain the protective barrier function of aging skin.

#### Musculoskeletal Health

Age-related degeneration of muscles and joints often results in stiffness, reduced flexibility, and impaired mobility. Improved lubrication of musculoskeletal tissues and enhanced circulation contribute to better joint mobility and muscle flexibility.<sup>[15]</sup>

#### Nervous System Regulation

The rhythmic and soothing nature of *Abhyanga* produces a calming effect on the nervous system, promotes relaxation, reduces anxiety, and improves sleep quality.<sup>[16]</sup> These effects are particularly important in elderly individuals, as psychological well-being plays a significant role in maintaining overall health during aging.

#### Enhancement of Circulation

Mechanical stimulation during massage enhances blood circulation and promotes the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to body tissues.<sup>[17]</sup> Enhanced circulation also supports metabolic activity and tissue repair processes.

#### Psychological Well-being

Regular massage is associated with reduced stress levels, improved emotional stability, and enhanced mood.<sup>[18]</sup> These psychological benefits significantly contribute to maintaining a positive quality of life during the aging process.

### Improvement in Sleep Quality

Sleep disturbances are commonly observed in elderly individuals. *Abhyanga* promotes relaxation and reduces fatigue, thereby facilitating improved sleep patterns and enhancing overall well-being. Massage therapy has been shown to improve sleep quality and reduce stress and pain in various clinical settings.<sup>[19]</sup> In clinical practice, regular administration of *Abhyanga* in elderly individuals has shown noticeable improvements in joint stiffness, sleep quality, and overall functional capacity and is beneficial in conditions associated with *Vata* predominance, such as *Sandhivata* and generalised body pain.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

*Jara* denotes a progressive state of decline marked by cumulative degenerative alterations within the body. As an inherent feature of *Kalaja Vridhdhava* (physiological aging), such changes unfold gradually; however, they are often accompanied by functional discomfort and are generally considered undesirable.<sup>[20,21]</sup> Contemporary biomedical research describes aging as a multifactorial phenomenon driven by cumulative cellular injury, oxidative imbalance, and diminished reparative potential at the tissue level.

From an Ayurvedic perspective, these degenerative changes can be interpreted as a consequence of progressive *Vata* predominance, *Dhatu kshaya*, and decline in *Ojas*. *Abhyanga*, through its *Snigdha* and *Brimhana* properties, helps in counteracting these pathological changes by restoring *Dosha* balance and enhancing tissue nourishment.

In this context, *Abhyanga*, the therapeutic application of oil through massage, is considered an essential component of *Dinacharya* in Ayurveda and is recommended for maintaining health and preventing disease. Classical texts describe multiple benefits to its regular practice, including mitigation of fatigue, induction of restorative sleep, enhancement of skin texture, and support of longevity. Such descriptions highlight *Abhyanga* as a preventive and rejuvenative intervention with the potential to modulate degenerative changes associated with aging.

From a modern physiological perspective, several mechanisms explain the beneficial effects of *Abhyanga*. Existing research, though largely centred on general massage practices rather than oil-based Ayurvedic procedures, supports these observations. It enhances local blood circulation and facilitates nutrient delivery to tissues. Stimulation of cutaneous mechanoreceptors further influences autonomic regulation, shifting the balance toward parasympathetic predominance and facilitating systemic relaxation along with improved sleep patterns. Massage improves muscle flexibility, reduces

joint stiffness, and enhances neuromuscular coordination. These effects are especially relevant in geriatric populations with mobility limitations and musculoskeletal discomfort. Additionally, documented psychological outcomes include alleviation of anxiety, stabilization of mood, and overall improvement in subjective well-being.

This aligns with the Ayurvedic view of *Abhyanga*. It nourishes *Dhatus* and stabilizes mental and emotional states. The *Snigdha* (unctuous) and *Ushna* (warm) properties of oils counteract the *Ruksha* (dry) and *Sheeta* (cold) qualities of aggravated *Vata Dosh*, thereby facilitating restoration of physiological equilibrium. This mechanism offers a logical basis for the observed improvements in skin health, joint function, sleep regulation, and overall general vitality among individuals adhering to regular *Abhyanga* practice.

Although the available evidence indicates several beneficial effects of *Abhyanga* in promoting healthy aging, the majority of modern studies focus on massage therapy rather than specifically on Ayurvedic oil massage. Therefore, well-designed clinical trials evaluating standardized *Abhyanga* protocols are required to further validate its role in geriatric healthcare and to establish evidence-based therapeutic guidelines.

Despite the potential benefits of *Abhyanga*, several limitations exist within the current body of research:

- Limited availability of controlled clinical trials.
- Lack of standardized protocols for massage techniques.
- Variability in types of oils and therapeutic methods used.
- Small sample sizes in existing studies.

Future investigations should aim to address these limitations in order to strengthen the scientific evidence supporting the role of *Abhyanga* in healthy aging

## CONCLUSION

While multiple strategies are available to address aging, the viewpoint of modern medicine differs from that of Ayurveda. Neither system can be considered superior or inferior; rather, the difference lies in the way each interprets and approaches the aging process. In Ayurveda, *Abhyanga* is considered a significant preventive as well as therapeutic measure. Through its nourishing, relaxing, and balancing effects, it helps maintain physiological equilibrium and counteract degenerative processes associated with aging. Regular oil massage enhances circulation and supports musculoskeletal function. It also improves sleep quality and psychological well-being, thereby

promoting healthy aging. The inclusion of *Abhyanga* within daily lifestyle practices offers a safe, economical, and easily adoptable method for promoting longevity and improving quality of life in elderly individuals. Further clinical studies are required to validate its role in geriatric healthcare and to establish standardized therapeutic guidelines.

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**\*Address for correspondence**

**Dr. Nisha Bhoi**

PG Scholar,

Dept. of Panchakarma, National

Institute of Ayurveda, Jaipur,

Rajasthan.

Email: [nishabhoy1996@gmail.com](mailto:nishabhoy1996@gmail.com)

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