

Abhyanga: Ayurvedic Oil Massage

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The body of one who uses oil massage regularly does not become affected much even if subjected to accidental injuries, or strenuous work. By using oil massage daily, a person is endowed with pleasant touch, trimmed body parts and becomes strong, charming and least affected by old age. Charaka Samhita: Sutrasthana: V: 88-89

Abhyanga should be resorted to daily, it wards off old age, exertion and aggravation of Vata. Ashtanga Hridayam: Sutrasthana:II:8-9

Abhyanga is the anointing of the body with oil. Often medicated and usually warm, the oil is massaged into the entire body before bathing. It can be beneficial for maintaining health and used as a medicine for certain disorders. *Abhyanga* can be incorporated into a routine appropriate for almost everyone.

The Sanskrit word *sneha* means both “oil” and “love,” and the effects of *abhyanga* are similar to the effect of saturation with love. Both experiences can give a deep feeling of stability, warmth and comfort. *Sneha*--oil and love--is *sukshma*, or “subtle.” This allows *sneha* to pass through minute channels in the body and penetrate deep layers of tissue.

Ayurveda teaches that there are seven dhatus, or layers of tissue in the body. Each is successively more concentrated and life-giving. It is taught that for the effects of *sneha* to reach to the deepest layer, it should be massaged into the body for 800 *matras*, roughly five minutes. If we consider that the entire body needs this kind of attention, a 15-minute massage is a minimum amount of time.

Benefits of External Oleation

(Outlined in: Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita and Ashtanga Hridayam)

Benefits of applying oil to the body (Abhyanga):

- Produces softness, strength and color to the body
- Decreases the effects of aging
- Bestows good vision
- Nourishes the body
- Increases longevity
- Benefits sleep patterns
- Benefits skin
- Strengthens the body's tolerance
- Imparts a firmness to the limbs
- Imparts tone and vigor to the dhatus (tissues) of the body
- Stimulates the internal organs of the body, increasing circulation
- Pacifies Vata and Pitta and Harmonizes Pitta

Benefits of applying oil to the scalp (Murdha taila):

- Makes hair grow luxuriantly, thick, soft and glossy
- Soothes and invigorates the sense organs
- Removes facial wrinkles

Benefits of applying oil to the ears (Karna purna):

- Benefits disorders in the ear which are due to increased Vata

- Benefits stiff neck
- Benefits stiffness in the jaw

Benefits of applying oil to the feet (Padaghata):

- Coarseness, stiffness, roughness, fatigue and numbness of the feet are alleviated
- Strength and firmness of the feet is attained
- Vision is enhanced
- Vata is pacified
- Sciatica is benefited
- Local veins and ligaments are benefited

Massaging Sneha (oil) into the human organism imparts a tone and vigor to its root-principles (Dhatus), in the same manner as water furnishes the roots of a tree or a plant with the necessary nutritive elements, and fosters its growth, when poured into the soil where it grows. The use of sneha at a bath causes the sneha to penetrate into the system through the mouths of the veins (siras) and the ducts (dhamanis) of the body, as also through the roots of the hair, and thus soothes and invigorates the body with its own essence.

Under the circumstances, massages and anointments of the body with oil or clarified butter should be prescribed by an intelligent person with due regard to one's habit, congeniality and temperament and to the climate and the season of the year as well as to the preponderance of the deranged Dosha or Doshas in one's physical constitution.

Sushruta Samhita, Chikitsa Sthanam: XXIV:29-32

These passages make it clear that we should consider our Prakriti (constitution), Vikriti (current condition) and our external environment in deciding which oils are best for us and how often we should perform *abhyanga*.

Ayurvedic literature states that it is beneficial to follow a Vata-pacifying *abhyanga* if your Vata is currently high or it is the dominant dosha in your Prakriti. The same holds true for Pitta and Kapha. (You can take the *Prakriti* and/or *Vikriti* tests on www.banyanbotanicals.com if you would like help in determining these conditions).

If you have more than one dominant dosha in your Prakriti, you will want to pacify doshas according to season. If you are a Pitta-Kapha combination, pacify Pitta during the warm weather and Kapha during the cold weather. If you are a Pitta-Vata combination, pacify Pitta during the warm weather and Vata during the cold weather. If you are a Vata-Kapha combination, pacify Vata during cold or dry weather and during the change of seasons and pacify Kapha during cold or wet weather. More extensive guidelines for each dosha are outlined below.

Vata Pacifying Abhyanga

The primary qualities of vata are dry, light, cool, rough, subtle and mobile. Most of these qualities are opposite to those of oil. This is why warm oil is especially good for pacifying vata.

If your vata is high, either in your Prakriti or Vikriti, doing *abhyanga* daily can be highly beneficial, even life-changing, as Vata is restored to its normal condition. Just be sure to do the *abhyanga* in a warm place and avoid getting chilled afterwards.

Types of Oil That Are Best for Vata:

Sesame is considered to be the “king of oils;” it is the preferred choice of oil for vata because it is inherently warming. If possible, use one that is organic and untoasted. Almond oil and mustard oil are also good choices because they too are warming. You may also consider using an herbal oil designed to pacify Vata, especially if vata is high in your Vikriti. The herbs that have been chosen for herbal oils enhance the vata-pacifying qualities of sesame oil. Vata herbal massage oils can be used alone or diluted with sesame, almond or mustard oils.

For increasing strength and stamina *Ashwagandha Oil* or *Ashwagandha/Bala Oils* may be the best for you.

Mahanarayan Oil is made from over 30 Ayurvedic herbs and is traditionally used for joint pain or weakness. If you warm it, massage it into the affected joints or muscles and proceed with your regular *abhyanga*, it can be fabulously beneficial. Following this with a warm bath with 1/3 cup each baking soda and ginger powder (provided there is no skin irritation) can enhance the effects even further.

Vata Dusting Powder:

If dusting powder does not irritate your skin try using one in the place of soap. You can use chickpea flour, or use a formula especially for Vata. Make a paste with the dusting powder and water, and then gently apply a small amount to the body. Once it dries into a paste, you can allow it to rinse off with the oil.

Pitta Pacifying Abhyanga

The primary qualities of Pitta are: oily, sharp, hot, light, fleshy-smelling, spreading and liquid. Since Pitta and oil share a number of qualities it is ideal to use medicated oil when you are trying to reduce Pitta symptoms (such as: skin irritations, rashes, itchiness). The addition of herbs enhances the Pitta pacifying properties of the oil.

Types of Oil That Are Best for Pitta:

Pitta pacifying herbal infused oils are best for *abhyanga*. Applying *Bhringaraj Oil* or *Brahmi Oil* to the scalp and soles of feet at bedtime may reduce pitta and encourage sound sleep. If you don't have medicated oils, use sunflower or coconut oil for your *abhyanga*. If you spend a lot of time in the sun, you may wish to add some *Neem Oil* to whatever your basic *abhyanga* oil is, because it is said to reduce pitta in the skin.

In general, gently heat the oil for *abhyanga*. Oil applied to the head should be cool in the summer and slightly warm in the winter.

Pitta Dusting Powder:

If dusting powder does not irritate your skin you may enjoy using chickpea flour or a specialized dusting formula in the place of soap. Make a paste with the flour or dusting powder and water, then gently apply a small amount to the body in the shower and let it rinse off with the oil.

Kapha Pacifying Abhyanga

The main qualities of Kapha are unctuous, cool, heavy, slow, smooth, soft and static. Kapha and oil share most qualities. Because like increases like, using oil, especially cool oil, may increase Kapha rather than decrease it. However, because oil has the ability to absorb the qualities of substances it is prepared with, appropriate herbal oils can decrease Kapha.

Sometimes the best massage for Kapha is udvartana, (massaging the body with soft, fragrant powders, like calamus powder). Vagbhatta says udvartana “mitigates kapha, liquefies the fat, produces stability of the body parts and excellence of the skin.” (AH: Sutrasthana:II:15) Sushruta says udvartana, “reduces the fat and the aggravated Kapha of the system, smoothes and cleanses the skin and imparts a firmness to the limbs.” (Sushruta Samhita, Cikitsasthana, XXIV:49)

Sushruta also says, “Anointing the body (with oil, etc.) imparts a glossy softness to the skin, guards against the aggravation of Vata and Kapha, improves the color and strength and gives a tone to the root-principles (Dhatu) [tissues] of the body.” (Sushruta Cikitsasthana: XXIV:28) This lets us know that there is benefit to be had for abhyanga for Kapha, if used appropriately.

Types of Oil That Are Best for Kapha:

Abhyanga with warm oil is best for kapha. While sesame, corn and mustard oils are all helpful because they are warming, herbal oils are a better choice for Kapha, as they add more Kapha pacifying properties to the oil. *Kapha Massage Oil* is a good choice for general use. (If you are using sesame oil, opt for untoasted sesame oil; toasted is more expensive and has a very strong natural scent). Less oil is needed for Kapha *abhyanga* than for Vata or Pitta.

Kapha Dusting Powder:

To accent the positive effects of *abhyanga* for kapha-types, vigorously rub an appropriate Kapha Dusting Powder into the body before or after performing *abhyanga*, either while working in or rinsing off the oil. You can use chickpea flour, but vaccha (calamus) powder is also nice if you can find it.

Abhyanga Routine

By using oil massage daily, a person is endowed with pleasant touch, trimmed body parts and becomes strong, charming and least affected by old age. Charaka Samhita: Sutrasthanam: V: 88-89

- Put about ½ cup oil in an 8 oz. squeeze bottle. Make sure the oil is not rancid.
- Place the bottle of oil in a pan of hot water until the oil is pleasantly warm.
- Sit or stand comfortably in a warm room, on a towel that you don't mind ruining with oil accumulation. Make sure you're protected from any wind.
- Apply the oil to your entire body.
- Massage the oil into your entire body, beginning at the extremities and working toward the middle of the body. Use long strokes on the limbs and circular strokes on the joints. Massage the abdomen and chest in broad, clockwise, circular motions. On the abdomen, follow the path of the large intestine; moving up on the right side of the abdomen, then across, then down on the left side. Massage the body for 5-20 minutes, with love and patience.
- Give a little extra time and attention to massaging the oil into your scalp, ears and feet, at least once a week. Apply oil to the crown of your head (adhipati marma) and work slowly out from there in circular strokes. Oil applied to the head should be warm but not hot. Put a

couple drops of warm oil on the tip of your little finger or on a cotton ball and apply to the opening of the ear canal. (If there is any current or chronic discomfort in the ears don't do this without the recommendation of your health care practitioner). When you massage your feet, be sure to wash them first when you shower, so you don't slip.

- Enjoy a warm bath or shower. A Vata, Pitta or Kapha dusting powder - can help rinse off the oil without drying out the skin. You can use a mild soap on the "strategic" areas. Be careful to wash your feet first and to be careful not to slip in the tub.
- When you get out of the bath, towel dry. Keep a special towel for drying off after your Abhyanga because it can eventually get ruined, due to the accumulation of oil.
- Put on a pair of cotton socks (organic, if you can find them) to protect your environment from the residual oil on your feet.
- Apply a dosha-appropriate essential oil to your wrists and neck.
- Enjoy.

(Note: The rest of this article is an excerpt taken directly from *Balance Your Hormones, Balance Your Life*, by Dr. Claudia Welch)

When or How Not to Do Abhyanga

- Over swollen, painful areas or masses on the body, without the knowledge and consent of your health-care practitioner
- Over infected or broken skin
- When there is high ama (toxicity, often indicated by a thick, white coating on the tongue), great physical discomfort, or acute illness. It is best to check with your Ayurvedic practitioner to see if you have any contraindications, before practicing abhyanga.
- When you have acute fever, chills, or flu
- When you have acute indigestion, or directly after taking emetics or purgatives
- When you have a medical condition, unless your health-care practitioner says it is okay to do abhyanga.
- During the menstrual cycle. Some women don't like to stop abhyanga during their cycle. If you chose to do it during your cycle, it is best to only apply the oil gently and for only about 5 minutes.
- During pregnancy

Laundry, Cleaning, and Plumbing Tips

Some people eventually stop doing abhyanga because they report that their towels or sheets are getting rancid and ruined, their plumbing is getting clogged up, and their bathtub floor is getting sticky with oil accumulation. Others persist and try to find a way around these problems. One of my patients reported that her towels were getting ruined. I asked her if she'd stopped doing abhyanga because of this. She laughed and said, "Hey—ruin my towels or ruin my life? It's not a choice."

If you'd rather not do either, try these tips:

- Keep one towel for sitting on when you apply the oil and one that you use only for drying off after your shower. The first will get ruined the quickest. The second will, too, eventually, even with the best laundry techniques.
- I asked Susan, a massage therapist friend, what she does to keep her sheets clean. She adds a few tablespoons each of vinegar and baking soda to the hot water, once it has filled the washbasin. She told me that this can be a volatile mixture when combined and can eat right through the pipes, as well as the oil. When added to laundry water, though, the corrosive mixture will have stopped its destructive fizzing action by the time the washer drains. There are some commercial products that Susan tried, which she read about in *Massage Magazine*. They worked, but she didn't care for the smell. If you can't get all the oil out, you might plan to replace your sheets or towels about twice a year.
- Although it is ideal to practice abhyanga in the morning, some people don't have time then and prefer to do it in the evening before bed to calm themselves down. If you turn out to be one of these people, wear a "special" set of natural fiber nightclothes for at least an hour after your shower, after your abhyanga. They will absorb most of the remaining oil on your skin. And, if you got oil in your hair, put a towel over your pillow, to protect it.
- Keep a bottle of dish detergent in your shower or tub. When you are done washing, squirt some on the tub or shower floor and spread it around with your feet, sort of mopping up the floor. Let the shower flow over it and wash everything down the drain. Doing this every time you wash after abhyanga prevents an accumulation of oil. If your balance is poor, the shower floor is slippery, or you fear you might slip, make sure that you hold on tight to something stable while you do this. Or get somebody else to do it or find another way to keep the floor clean. Please don't slip and hurt yourself. That would defeat the purpose.
- When you launder oily towels and linens, there is a risk of their catching fire if they are too oily or too hot. If a towel is very oily, it's better to throw it away. If you dry these fabrics in a dryer, it's better to use low heat. Do not to leave oily towels in a hot car. I actually know someone who was laundering a lot of oily sheets and towels for a spa, left the hot linens in his car in the hot sun in his car with the windows up, and the linens spontaneously combusted, causing fire damage to the inside of his car.
- Pour a little environmentally friendly drain cleanser down your drain once a month. I have been told that cold water, used with soap that can dissolve in cold water, causes the oil to bead up and wash along the drain better than does hot water, which makes it stay liquefied and stick to the plumbing. I have not tried this, but it is worth investigation.