

REVIEW ARTICLE

# Significance of *Abhyanga* (Massage) Therapy in Neonate According to Ayurveda

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## ABSTRACT

Neonate care is of huge importance for the appropriate growth and for baby's healthy life. Neonatal health is single among most of the significant health challenges facing the developing world. After birth, the baby depends on external help and needs to adapt to live outside the womb and to develop a sense of security in the newborn, *Abhyanga* is essential. *Abhyanga* which is daily oil massage is a routine practice in the care of neonates for their growth and development. In *Ayurveda*, *Abhyanga* is advised right from birth to make the child conscious and stable.

**Key Words** *Ayurveda; Abhyanga; Neonate*

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## INTRODUCTION

*Panchakarma* is a science that deals with the adult as well as children. *Panchakarma* is the backbone of *Ayurveda*. *Panchakarma* is advised for every human being except it should be used in mild form in children. It is said in *Kashyapa Sutrasthan* that excessive *Shoshana*, *Samsodhana* and *Raktamokshna* are contraindicated in child. They should be treated with *Snigdha*, *Sheet*, *Madhura Annapana*, *Lepa* and *Pariseka*<sup>1</sup>. One of the procedures of *Panchakarma* that is done in children is *Abhyanga*. *Abhyanga* which is daily oil massage is a routine practice in the care of neonates for their growth and development. In *Ayurveda*, *Abhyanga* is advised right from birth

to make the child conscious and stable. The body of the baby is smeared with medicated oil called *Balataila* and gentle massage is given to the child. The procedure of *Abhyanga* will improve the vitiation of *Vata Dosha*, which occurred during the child's birth. *Vata* is present predominantly in the skin, the oil-anointing is the best for skin, so one should hold to it habitually, and by resorting to massage daily the body will have good tactile stimulation and good strength<sup>2</sup>. *Charak* had given the scientific basis of *Abhyanga* in *Sutrasthan* that predominance of *Vata Dosha* in the skin is more<sup>3</sup>. Tactile sensations are under the control of skin. Oil has *Vata Shamaka* properties hence *Abhyanga* with

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oil is very useful for skin. During the *Pranaprtiyagaman* procedure of neonate, *Bala* oil is indicated for *Abhyanga* as *Pariseka* in *Ashtangahridya* to make the baby stable and conscious. *Abhyanga* is helpful to check premature aging, reduce the hassle of daily activity, and is healthy, hence doing the *Abhyanga* to a infant baby is very useful for healthy growth and development. Neonatal massage has been a conventional practice in India and also in other neighbouring countries. Massage therapy has been known to get better the skin barrier function<sup>4</sup>.

### 1.1. Selection of oil or unctuous substances for

***Abhyanga*:** *Abhyanga* with oil gives a smooth, gliding surface without resistance and therefore touch is better accepted. From the Ayurveda viewpoint, *Sesame oil* is considered as most excellent among all vegetable oils. When oil is prepared with decoctions and paste of herbal medicines, milk, and meat soup etc. it is called *Siddha Taila*. *Bala Taila* is such a combination used for newborn babies. *Bala Taila* boost the strength and nutrition of the body tissues and is helpful to rescue hypothermia.

**1.2. Indication:** It is a safe procedure which can be done on every newborn who is really stable, except in few contraindications as explained below:

**1.3. Contraindication:** The time, when *Abhyanga* is going to be done, for how long it has to be performed and which oil should be used according to winter or summer season, etc depend on the *Pachakagni* (digestive fire) of the

patient. Whenever there is vitiation in *Kapha* and *Pitta Dosha* in the body or the patient is suffering from indigestion, if he has gone through the *Shodhana* (*Panchakarma*) processes; in such condition *Abhyanga* is contraindicated. There are few more contraindications for the *Abhyanga* of newborn babies.

- Immediate after feeding.
- Baby with hypoglycaemia.
- Sick newborn – neonate with laziness, denied to feed, and having signs of sepsis.
- Newborn with congenital heart diseases like cyanotic heart diseases.
- Vitally unstable neonate.
- Newborn with respiratory distress required oxygen.
- Exaggerated neonatal jaundice<sup>5</sup>.

## PROCEDURE

**2.1. When to start:** From a neonatal point of view, *Abhyanga* should be immediately done after birth once the baby gets vitally stable and then daily either in morning or evening at once. There is no specific time or indication to do the procedure for the healthy neonate with the exception that newborn should be vitally stable and no signs of illness or sickness like Lethargy, Refuse to feed, Convulsions, Respiratory distress, etc.

**2.2. Time of the procedure:** One can do *Abhyanga* therapy in baby at any time during the day, but the best time is the morning time for *Abhyanga*, while one should be careful that, room

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temperature should not be less than 25°C in turn to prevent hypothermia to the baby. For this reason warmer, room heaters, etc should be used to make the room warm; but one should not exercise smoke or burning of carbon substances like coal, kerosene, organic substances, etc. to warm the room as smoke is harmful to neonatal lungs. Also, windows should be shut down and no air drought should be there while doing procedure.

**2.3. For how many days in one setting:** One can carry on the *Abhyanga* therapy till the completion of infantile age i.e. one year of life if there is no other illness disturbing the baby.

**2.4. How to do the Neonatal massage:** Movement starts on the part of the body where the baby seems to like immobile touch (often the head, hands or feet), with one slow but fixed movement at a time. A deeper pressure, than that of a itchy stimulus, has been shown to produce improved behaviour in response to massage movements. Rhythmical massage movements should be continued only if the baby remains prepared and the parents are encouraged to observe and be ready to change their handling behaviour as the baby changes. The baby's trust and anticipated tolerance for massage builds slowly over a number of therapy sessions. On the other hand, *Abhyanga* should be done in the *Anulomana* direction i.e. in the direction of hair follicles (from the proximal end to distal end of trunk and extremities).

The moderate pressure neonatal massage therapy consisted of the 15-min massage therapy

protocol. The 15-min session consists of three uniform 5-min stimulation phases, the first and third phases consist tactile stimulation and the middle phase consists kinaesthetic stimulation. In tactile stimulation phase the neonate should be placed in a prone position and stroked with moderate pressure (e.g., slight skin colour change from pink to white in a Caucasian baby or slight indentations in skin for all infants). The neonates are massaged for five or 1-min periods (12 strokes at 5 seconds per stroking motion) over each body part in the following sequence:

1. From top of the head to the neck and then back to top of the head.
2. From the neck region across the shoulders.
3. From upper back to the waist and back to the upper back.
4. From thigh to the foot then to the thigh on both legs.
5. And lastly, from the shoulder to the hand and to the shoulder on both arms.

In kinaesthetic stimulation phase, the infant is placed in a supine position and each arm, then each leg, and finally both the legs together are flexed and extended as in a bicycling motion. Each flexion/extension motion lasts 10 seconds for a total of five, 1-min segments. The preparation and duration of the light pressure massage (*Samvahana*) sessions are identical to the moderate pressure sessions except that the light pressure stroking is used during the first and last 5-min periods of the procedure. For the middle period of 5-min kinaesthetic stimulation remained the same. This light pressure massage

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is like *Samvahana* while moderate pressure massage resembles to the *Abhyanga* in *Ayurveda*.

## DISCUSSION

Newborn care is one of the most important basic care and massage has been practiced in the past and present. It is an effective and economically cheaper method is essential considering the economic status of the individuals. Prevention of neonatal morbidity is also a factor that has to be born in mind. In the classical texts of *Ayurveda*, the care of newborn consist of *Abhyanga*, *Snana*, *Jatakarma*, etc as a part of daily care of the newborn. *Snehana* (oleation) brings elasticity in the skin. *Snehana*, in the form of *Abhyanga*, is one of the essential therapeutic procedure that is practiced from the days of Ancient *Acharyas* till today. *Ayurveda* has given more strain on the conservation of health. To get ideal physical and mental health, it is necessary to follow a prescribed regimen everyday which includes exercise, care of different organs and personal hygiene. Due to *Abhyanga* skin becomes soft, beautiful and increases mental and physical strength and reduces stress<sup>6</sup>.

Some of the key benefits of daily infant massage are as follows:

1. Enhancing the circulatory and respiratory system of the baby by bringing beneficial blood to all the cells of the body.
2. Daily *Abhyanga*/massage boost digestion power, healthy muscle tone, aiding growth and development of your infant.
3. The massage helps to increase relaxation enabling your baby to establish better sleep patterns.
4. Regular *Abhyanga* relieves muscular tension caused due to foetal position.
5. Spending time and communicating with your newborn during this valuable time in their lives is particularly pleasing and reaps long-term benefits for both emotional and physical health.
6. Helps develop baby's first language touch.
7. It teaches babies how to be aware of their body's tension and how to release it, an precious gift as they grow into adulthood.
8. Releases the "cuddle hormone" oxytocin (also known as the bonding hormone) which lowers blood pressure, reduces anxiety and pain and also promotes relaxation. As your baby's blood pressure lowers so does yours.
9. Relieves symptoms of colic, gas, and constipation.
10. Massaging your baby can stimulate their major systems, for instance, massage stimulates their nervous system. Each nerve has a protective shell around it, called the myelin sheath, which speed up the conduction of impulses from the brain to the rest of the body. The process of covering the nerves (myelination) continues even after birth and usual sensory stimulation, such as massage, speeds this process. In addition, the stimulation provided by your caring touch is a

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natural kind that is relevant to the baby's world, more so than artificially created toys or videos<sup>7</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Children are going to be our future so it is our accountability to maintain their health and development. Through *Panchkarma* process we can pacify the *Doshas* in our body and can live a healthy life. Same is for the children and we can attain this by a simple procedure of *Panchkarma* that is *Abhyanga*. *Abhyanga*(Massage) is one of the therapeutic protocols and very effective to gain weight, reduces pain, enhances immunity and accelerates the healthy growth and development of baby. With appropriate selection of oil and with certain precautions under medical supervision and advice one can practice *Abhyanga* from birth to infantile age without any harm is the key message to the modern health world.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared

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