

Abhyanga: Routine Warm Oil Daily Self Massage

Written by Claudia Welch, LAc

"The body of one who uses oil massage regularly does not become affected much even if subjected to injury 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 Vol. 1, V: 88-89

Abhyanga is the anointing of the body with oil. Often medicated and usually warm, the oil is massaged into the entire body before bathing. For thousands of years, people have used *abhyanga* to maintain health, benefit sleep patterns, increase longevity. It has also been used as a medicine for certain disorders. *Abhyanga* can be incorporated into a routine appropriate for almost anyone.

The Sanskrit word *sneha* can be translated as both "oil" and "love". It is believed that the effects of *abhyanga* are similar to those received when one is saturated with love. Like the experience of being loved, *abhyanga* can give a deep feeling of stability and warmth. *Sneha* is subtle; this allows the oil/love to pass through minute channels in the body and penetrate deep layers of tissue.

In Ayurveda, it is believed that there are seven layers of tissue in the body (called *dhatu*s). Each successive layer is more concentrated and life-giving. For *sneha* to reach the deepest layer, it is believed that it must be massaged into the body for 800 *matras*, roughly five minutes. To give this kind of attention to your entire body, you may need about fifteen minutes. Considering the benefits that have been gained by people for thousands of years, fifteen minutes per day is a minimal amount of time.

Benefits of applying warm oil to the whole 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 *dhatu*s (tissues) of the body
- Stimulates the internal organs of the body, including circulation
- Pacifies *Vata* and *Pitta* and harmonizes *Kapha*

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 (cracking skin), 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

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 warmed oil. This is why warm oil is especially good for pacifying Vata. If your Vata is high, either in your *Prakriti* (natural state) or *Vikriti* (imbalanced condition), doing *abhyanga* daily can be highly beneficial, even life changing. The great teacher Sushruta said, "The deranged vayu [*Vata*] of the body is restored to its normal condition by the help of *Udvardana* (oil massage)." Sushruta Vol.2, 24:28. Be sure to do the *abhyanga* in a warm place and avoid getting chilled afterwards.

Abhyanga Daily Routine

- Keep about one cup of *Vata* reducing oil in a squeeze bottle. Pure sesame oil is perfect, however many companies offer special *Vata*-reducing herbal-infused oils. Play with it.
- When you wake in the morning, place the bottle of oil in a pan of hot (not boiling) water until the oil is pleasantly warm.
- Sit or stand comfortably in a warm room (a bathroom pre-warmed with a steamy shower and heat lamp works well) on a dedicated "oil towel", an old towel that you don't mind getting a little oily. Make sure you're protected from any drafts.
- Without being in a hurry, lovingly and patiently massage the oil into your entire body for about 10-15 minutes, beginning at the extremities and working toward the middle of the body. Use long strokes on the limbs (long bones) and circular strokes on the joints. Massage the abdomen and chest in broad, clockwise, circular motions.
- Apply oil to the crown of your head 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 acute or chronic discomfort in the ears don't do this until it clears.)
- Put a couple drops of warm oil on the tip of your little finger and apply to the opening and inside of the nasal passage. (If there is any acute or chronic nasal congestion don't do this until it clears.)

- After you've massaged your entire body, enjoy a warm bath or shower. Be sure to wash your feet off before entering the shower. Slipping is bad.
- Remove the oil with a gentle soap.
- When you get out of the shower, towel dry. Keep another special towel for drying off after your massage because it can eventually get ruined, due to the accumulation of oil.