



Abhyanga

Ayurvedic self-massage using warm oil

An ancient Indian practice

Abhyanga is the Sanskrit term for a massage using warm oil. It is part of the Dinacharya (daily practices) specified by the Brhat Trayi and Laghutrayi series of Ayurvedic textbooks to maintain good health and well-being, and particularly to keep the doshas (Vata, Pitta and Kapha) into balance through the seasons. Many benefits of this practice are listed, particularly to improve dryness conditions, reduce anxiety and insomnia, aid joint health and generally nourish all the body tissues.

“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 Vol. 1, V: 88-89

(One of the Great ancient texts of Ayurveda)

Abhyanga provides the means for transdermal absorption of the healing qualities of the massage oil. It helps the skin, which is the largest organ in the body, perform its diverse functions efficiently, whether it is allowing toxins to be released from the body or nourishment to be absorbed by the tissues. It is like oiling the engine of your car — if you do it regularly, your engine will be in peak condition, and give you years and years of trouble-free performance.

Two versions of Abhyanga as a routine self-care

As a self-care practice, it is easy to do and can be part of a regular home spa. I learnt two versions from an Ayurvedic practitioner.

- A short version (5 minutes massage, 10 minutes meditation or rest, followed by a warm/hot shower or bath and drying) is suitable for daily use and does not involve oiling hair. The massage progresses from feet to face, with a special focus on the heart area.
- A longer version, 15 minutes massage, 15 minutes minimum meditation or rest, followed by a warm/hot shower or bath with shampoo and drying, is suitable for a weekly routine.

This version follows the more traditional Abhyanga taught in Ayurveda from the head to the feet.

In both versions, strokes follow the direction of the heart but the short version proceeds from feet to face and the second version from head to feet.

The rest time is important to allow time for toxins (ama) to be released through the skin after the massage and then removed with a warm wash.

What you need:

- Massage oil. There are special therapeutic ayurvedic oils, which are formulated for each dosha and for special applications. But plain sesame oil¹ in Winter, coconut oil in Summer or Jojoba oil at any time, work well for everyone. If you do not like any of these oils, go to one of the specialist websites to find out which other oil might suit you. If you have eczema or another dermatological condition it is best to take advice from your doctor about the practice of Abhyanga,
- Warmth. You need to warm your oil (dipping a cup or bottle in very hot water for a few minutes is enough), being in a warm room and have access to hot water.
- An old towel or gown to cover yourself after the massage, a towel to dry yourself after your shower or bath

Then you are ready to go!

1. If you choose sesame oil, look for cold-pressed, chemical-free organic sesame oil for best results. You will need to use “cured” rather than “raw” oil.



Short Abhyanga in 10 steps

1. Test the temperature by putting a drop on your inner wrist, oil should be comfortably warm and not hot
Sitting on the floor or on a chair, start massaging your right foot using your thumbs and the flat of your fingers, then massage your ankle with circular motions.
2. Working up your leg, use long, quick, back and forth strokes on your calves and shins, with circular motions around the knee, then continue with long strokes along the front and back of the thighs. You will come across some tender points that are likely to be 'marma points' associated with your ankle, knee and hip joints.
3. Repeat on the left foot and leg.
4. Working up your body towards your heart, start from both hip joints and gently reach around to your buttocks, back, and spine, using circular motions of both hands as well as up and down strokes if you can do so without straining. Then massage your stomach with a gentle clockwise circular motion around your navel, then move to your chest using a straight up and down motion over your breastbone.
5. Take time over the heart area, massaging each breast and reaching to the lymph nodes in your armpits, starting with the right side and then moving to the left side. Return to the heart and apply an extra clockwise circular motion with a bit of extra pressure.
6. Massage your arms, starting with the right arm. Start massaging the fingers and thumb of your right hand with your left hand. Then use a circular motion around the wrist, and long, quick up and down strokes along your forearms, circling round the elbow and reaching to the shoulder, reaching out the back of the shoulder with your fingers.
When you find a tender point, take a breath and exhale slowly. Then take your left hand in your right hand and repeat the same motions as you massage your left arm.
7. After returning your hands to the heart area, massage the front and back of your neck.
Massage the front and back of your neck using your palms and the flat of your fingers, first with circular motions and then with up and down strokes in the back of your neck and up and down the sides of your neck from the area between your ear and your lower jaw all the way down to your clavicles.
8. Gently massage your face and ears, with both hands, paying special attention to your temples and behind and under your ears.
9. Wrap yourself in your old towel to allow the oil to absorb into the skin and help release toxins for a few minutes. The longer the better.
10. Enjoy a shower to wash off the oil with your favourite soap and dry yourself gently, avoiding vigorous rubbing. In just a few minutes, you have given yourself a luxury spa that sets you for the day in the morning and prepares you for deep sleep if done before going to bed.



Longer Abhyanga in 10 steps (you need 30 to 40 minutes)

- 1. Prepare** your warm oil and towel and get ready for your massage in a warm room
(warm is particularly important for soothing Vata if you have a stressful office type work).
- 2. Apply oil** first to the crown of your head (adhipati marma) and work slowly out from there in circular strokes— spend a couple of minutes massaging your entire scalp using the fingers of both hands. The scalp is home to many important marma points, equivalent to acupuncture points in Ayurveda as gateways to energy flows in the body. Apply small circular movements of your fingertips around points that feel tender to you.
- 3. Face.** Massage in circular motion on your forehead, temples, cheeks, and jaws with both hands, always starting each stroke with an upward movement, using the flat of your fingers. Drop your lower jaw to feel the contours of your face, under and over the cheekbones and around the eye sockets. Be sure to massage your ears, especially your earlobes, using your thumbs and index fingers, as they are home to essential marma points and nerve endings.
- 4. Arms.** Use long strokes on each arm, with circular motions on the shoulder, elbow and wrist joints, massaging the base of each finger and the palm of the hand using your thumb and the fingers of your other hand to massage. Return to the heart to massage the other arm in the same way.
- 5. Chest.** Massage your chest with both hands in broad, clockwise, circular motions, taking time to massage around each breast. Reach with your fingers over your shoulders, massaging around each shoulder joint with your fingers. Breathe out slowly when you come across tender points. Massage the sternum area with the palms of your hands or the flat of your fingers more vigorously (to stimulate your thymus gland and your immune system).
- 6. Lower back.** Reaching to your back with both hands, use long strokes up and down your lower back as well as small circular movements with your thumbs to the sides and your fingers over your back. Notice any tender or even painful spot. With practice you can gain a detailed awareness of your sacrum.
- 7. Abdomen.** Move the hands from the back to the abdomen and engage in broad clockwise circular motions. Follow the path of the large intestine, moving up on the right side of the abdomen, then across, then down on the left side, repeating this motion slowly three times.
- 8. Lower pelvis.** Massage the lower pelvis with both hands, using small circular motions with the flat of the fingers over the ovaries and long strokes from the sides of the pelvis to the symphysis pubis and back. Take your time and be aware of your breath as you massage scar areas that may remain tender for many years post-surgery.
- 9. Legs.** Use long strokes on each leg, with circular motions on the groins and hip joints, knee and ankle joints. Use both hands, with your thumb over your thigh and your fingers under in the long strokes. Use the palm of both hands with your middle finger leading the movement around the patella of your knee and your thumb above your knee cap. Use the flat of the hand in the downward move of the stroke and the flat of the fingers in the upward move along the shins, then a ring-like movement around the ankle.

Take time to massage each foot to complete the massage of each leg. Feet are a very important part of the body with the nerve endings of essential organs and vital marma points.

End the massage of each leg with a long upward stroke towards the direction of your heart.
- 10. Rest** with the oil for at least 15 minutes so that the oil can absorb and penetrate into the deeper layers of the body. Then enjoy a warm bath or shower but avoid vigorously soaping and rubbing the body. When you get out of the bath, towel dry gently.

Enjoy the feeling of having nourished your body, mind, and spirit and carry that with you throughout your day or as a preparation for a restorative and blissful sleep.