

# Marmas in Shiroabhyanga - A Review Article

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## ABSTRACT

In the realm of *Ayurveda* therapy, *shiroabhyanga* stands as a time-honoured tradition which has been practised since centuries. It is explained in several *samhitas* as a part of *dhinacharya* and also in therapeutic measures of *shirorogas*. This therapeutic head massage involves a series of systematic application of oil to scalp, hair and neck followed by specific manoeuvres and strokes. *Shiroabhyanga* is known to provide relaxation but its benefits are beyond that – nourishes the mind body and soul, promoting better sleep, reduces stress, improves cognitive function, etc by stimulating several marma points in head, *shiroabhyanga* is believed to alleviate a myriad of physical and mental ailments, including headaches, insomnia, hair loss, anxiety, etc. The *taila* for *shiroabhyanga* is selected based on the person's body constitution and considering the disease condition. This review article deals with *shiroabhyanga* as a type of *snehana* therapy, its method of performing *shiroabhyanga*, benefits, mode of action and effect of *shiroabhyanga* on stimulating *marma*.

**KEYWORDS:** *Ayurveda*, *shiroabhyanga*, *marma*, *head massage*

## INTRODUCTION

*Snehana* is an important *poorvakarma* which is administered prior to *samshodana* procedure. *Sneha* denotes oily substance and the therapy in which oily substances are used to oleate the body is known as *Snehana* therapy. It is done in two ways, internally as *abhyanthara snehana* e.g. by oral administration of oily substances and externally as *bahya snehana* e.g. by *abhyanga*. *Snehana* is one among the *shadupakrama*, and is advocated as a unique therapeutic procedure in a variety of disease. <sup>(1)</sup>

As the anatomical structure of each body part differs, oil may have to be applied differently according to the structure. Secondly, depending on the degree of *snehana* required in a person's body, one may have to adopt different forms of oil application in order to get maximum effect. Example:

- *Murdha taila* -method of applying oil to head
- *Sneha avagahana* – using oil in the form of tub bath instead of water.
- *Parisheka* -a procedure in which a stream of oil in made to fall continuously on body surface <sup>(2)</sup>

## MURDHA TAILA

*Shiroabhyanga* is a type of *murdha taila*. *Murdha taila* simply refers to application of oil over head.

This is also known as *shirastarpana*. In healthy individual it is either plain or medicated oil used in this procedure or oil may be selected based on *prakrti* of the individual. In diseased person the oil processed with specific drugs that can cure the illness is preferred. <sup>(3)</sup>

## THERAPEUTIC EFFECT OF MURDHA TAILA

- Prevents and cures headache due to different causes
- Prevents and cures premature greying of hair
- Desirable in persons who wish to have firm, long and dark hair
- Prevents and cures baldness
- Effective in curing the hair fall
- Scalp bones become stronger.
- Improves the complexion of the face
- Induces sound sleep <sup>(3)</sup>

## Shiroabhyanga

Smearing the oil followed by massage by specific maneuvers refers to *shiroabhyanga*.

*Shiroabhyanga* is most ideal for routine practice especially for healthy individual. Mere smearing the

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oil with no following massage, smearing the oil followed by simple massage and smearing the oil followed by placing specific strokes on the head, all these three methods are known as *shiroabhyanga*. One can get all the beneficial effects of *murdha taila* by this *shiroabhyanga* procedure. If the client is suffering from painful lesions of the scalp, or other dermatological conditions like ulcerations and inflammation then simple massage or massage with specific strokes cannot be performed for evident reasons.

## REQUIREMENTS

Comfortable, cushioned knee-high chair, Luke warm oil, plain or medicated for application. Cloth for draping the body below the neck.

## SELECTION OF OIL

In healthy individuals, oil may be prescribed according to the *prakriti* of the client as in table 1.

**TABLE 1 Selection of oil based on *prakriti* of the individual**

Type of <i>prakriti</i>	Oil used
<i>Vata prakriti</i>	<i>Himasagara taila</i>
<i>Pitta prakriti</i>	<i>Chandanadi taila, chandana bala lakshadi taila, ksheera bala taila</i>
<i>Kapha prakriti</i>	<i>Triphaladi taila,</i>
<i>Sama prakriti</i>	<i>Asanabilvadi taila</i>

Where the *prakriti* of the person is formed by the combination of *doshas*, mixture of the above oils in equal amounts may be effectively used in accordance with the *dosha* involved in the formation of *prakriti*. Further, if the client has any complaints related to head, scalp or hair specific oil may be used for the *abhyanga* as in table 2.

**TABLE 2. Showing selection of oil based on specific condition**

Condition of individual	Oil used
Hair fall	<i>Dhaturapatradhi taila</i>
Dandruff	<i>Dhaturapatradhi taila</i>
Cranial nerve disorders	<i>Narayana taila, dhanvantara taila, masha taila etc.</i>
Premature graying	<i>Nilibhringadi taila, bhringaraja taila, bhringamalaka taila.</i>

If these specific oils are not available, simple *murchhita taila* may be used to get the benefits of *abhyanga*. To get the maximum benefits it is better to use specific oils, prescribed for different conditions

## Poorva karma

*Shiroabhyanga* may be performed at any time of the day before the bath according to the habit of the client. Even then, early morning at the time of sunrise is the most ideal time for the *Shiroabhyanga*

procedure. Client is asked to refresh himself by brushing his teeth and washing the face after evacuating the bowel and voiding urine. This may be followed by moderate warming up exercise. Now the client is ready for *shiroabhyanga*. Client is made to sit on a cushioned knee-high chair. His body is draped with a cloth below the neck. The therapist should first chant the *swastivachana* hymn or prayer and then perform *abhyanga* procedure. Therapist standing behind the client is ideal position to carry out *shiroabhyanga* procedure.

## Procedure

The technique of *shiroabhyanga* includes smearing the oil to the portions of the scalp followed by placing specific strokes. The whole procedure may be performed in the following steps

### ➤ SMEARING THE OIL

The oil meant for the application is first heated on a water bath approximately up to 40°C, to make it lukewarm. The oil is then poured on the hands of the therapist, held just over the head of the client. Oil is then spread all over the head including the neck and the ear pinna with the palmar surface of the hands. Moving the palms from before backwards is enough to smear the oil on the head if the scalp has short trimmed hair. If the client has long hair, fingers have to be poked between the hairs in an attempt to smear the oil to the scalp. It should be noted here that if the client is suffering from any disease of the scalp, and is contagious, then the oil should be painted on the scalp with the help of cotton wool.

### ➤ PREPARATION OF INDIVIDUAL

*Shiroabhyanga* can be performed at any time of the day before bath according to habit of the patient but the best time is during early morning at the time of sunrise. The person is made to sit on a comfortable knee-high chair, his body is covered with a cloth below the neck, the ideal position of therapist is behind the client.

### ➤ STEPS OF MASSAGING

#### 1. Gharshana hasta

It means massaging from before backward ie: after smearing the oil, whole head is massaged by using the palmar aspect of hand from before backward by applying gentle as well as firm pressure. It should include vertex, temporal and occipital areas of head and this is continued for a desirable period of time.

#### 2. Mridvanguli tradana

It denotes picking strokes where fingers of both hands are moved as if picking up tuft of hair. This maneuver should be gentle but producing mild traction effect on hairs. It should impart a pleasant sensation to the person and should not produce any sort of discomfort or pain.

### 3. Dwihasta tadana

Gentle strokes are placed with the palmar surface on the scalp by both hands either alternatively or simultaneously. It should cover all of include vertex, temporal and occipital areas of head.

### 4. Taranga hasta

Rapid rocking movements are applied on the head by both palms simultaneously. While placing the strokes only base of thumb and little finger comes in contact with the head.

### 5. Anguli kridana hasta

These are called finger strokes. Here the therapist places gentle strokes on the head by making rocking movement of both palms with its fingers stretched. While stroking only the palmar aspect of the little finger and thumb will touch the scalp.

### 6. Mridu mushti tadana

In this step gentle strokes are applied all over the head with closed fist through the ulnar border. Initially the strokes are placed simultaneously with both hands and later strokes are applied with alternate hands.

### 7. Squeeze strokes

Here tuft of hair is grasped followed by gentle squeeze producing comfortable traction on hair. Every part of hair is treated in this manner.

### 8. Ghatitha hasta

Flat palm of therapist is placed on the head of client and it is molded into shape of scalp so that every portion of palmar aspect of the palm and fingers comes in contact with the head followed by gentle and firm pressure application. Every part of head is treated similarly.

### 9. Ear massage

Ear pinna is grasped with thumb anteriorly and other fingers posteriorly, then the pinna is rubbed between the fingers. Then by supporting pinna with the fingers on the posterior, thumb is firmly moved downward in the anterior of the pinna.

Each type of stroke is to be performed for about 5 minutes and thus the whole process of head message takes about 30 to 40 minutes.

### Pashchat karma

The individual is asked to take rest on the chair itself for about 15 mins and then he may be allowed to take a head bath with lukewarm water. he may use soap or Bengal gram powder to cleanse the oil.

### Precautions

Since the therapist is using bare hands, he should make it sure that the client is not having any contagious disease. If the client is having tender points, massage should not be done on these points. <sup>(4)</sup>

### RATE OF ABSORPTION OF SNEHA <sup>(5)</sup>

The oil is applied to the skin in different procedures of *bahya Sneha*. Where in the oil gets absorbed and distributed to the whole body to show systemic or generalized effect. The absorption as well as distribution of the oil with the herbal ingredients impregnated in it takes specific duration and it is as in table 3.

**TABLE 3. Levels of absorption of oil**

LEVELS OF ABSORPTION	MATRA KALA	TIME TAKEN IN SECONDS
Root of <i>romakoopa</i>	300	96
<i>Twak</i>	400	128
<i>Rakta dhathu</i>	500	160
<i>Mamsa dhathu</i>	600	192
<i>Medho dhathu</i>	700	224
<i>Asthi dhathu</i>	800	256
<i>Majja dhathu</i>	900	288

### MODE OF ACTION OF HEAD OIL MASSAGE <sup>(6)</sup>

The fluids of skin are drained to different parts of the body while doing *abhyanga* due to the osmotic pressure. *Abhyanga* causes hydrostatic pressure in the extracellular compartment of the skin. This pressure increases the blood circulation to a part where massage is done, causing splanchnic pooling of the blood to that surface, which leads to the absorption of the medicated oil/ghee and allows the passive entrance of the phytonutrients into the systemic circulation and then to the target structure. <sup>(6)</sup>

*Abhyanga* acts on skin, which is the seat for both *vata* and *lasika*. In this way, the lymphatic drainage will be the prime effect of *abhyanga*. Lymph exhibits large amount of amino acid tryptophan. Hypothetically, after massage; amino acids like tryptophan increase in blood. It causes a parallel increase in neurotransmitter serotonin which is made from tryptophan at motor end plates.

The piezoelectricity is derived from pressure. While utilizing a medium of unctuous substance to reduce the friction, a good amount of rhythm is used and creates magnetic field and electricity in the body. By this charging, the conductivity of nerves will be increased. Electricity is discharged into nerve fiber at regular intervals and moves in circular pattern. <sup>(7)</sup>

### MARMA

There are about 107 *marma* points in the body, among them 12 are called *padu marma*, of which many are located in the head and neck region. This shows how vital the head and neck region are to the whole of our physiological and psychological functioning.



*Marmas* are anatomical locations that connects muscles, veins, ligaments, bones, and joints. All *marma* points are sensitive areas. So, massage in this

area should be done carefully. *Abhyanga* is an important tool to treat internal organs through *marma* points.

**TABLE 4. Marmas in *shiras*<sup>(8)</sup>**

Name of <i>marma</i>	number	Type	Site	Measurement
<i>Nila</i>	2	<i>Vaikalyakara</i>	On either side of trachea, near the lower jaw	4 <i>anguli</i>
<i>Manya</i>	2	<i>Vaikalyakara</i>	½ inch downwards and backwards from the angle of mandibular bone	4 <i>anguli</i>
<i>Siramatruka</i>	8	<i>Sadhyapranahara</i>	½ inch lateral to outer tendon of trachea	4 <i>anguli</i>
<i>Phana</i>	2	<i>Vaikalyakara</i>	At the level of saddle of nose, at nasopharynx	½ <i>anguli</i>
<i>Apanga</i>	2	<i>Vaikalyakara</i>	At outer angle of eye, lateral to orbital fossa	½ <i>anguli</i>
<i>Vidhura</i>	2	<i>Vaikalyakara</i>	Behind and below ear, just below mastoid bone	½ <i>anguli</i>
<i>Krukatika</i>	2	<i>Vaikalyakara</i>	At the junction of head and neck	½ <i>anguli</i>
<i>Shankha</i>	2	<i>Sadhyapranahara</i>	In between tragus of ear and lateral corner of eye	½ <i>anguli</i>
<i>Utkshepa</i>	2	<i>Vishalyagna</i>	Behind upper border of helix of ear, at the hairline above temple	½ <i>anguli</i>
<i>Avartha</i>	2	<i>Vaikalyakara</i>	Upper border of orbital cavity at the center of eyebrow	½ <i>anguli</i>
<i>Shrungataka</i>	4	<i>Sadhyapranahara</i>	At the junction of channel of eyes, ears, nose and tongue, nasopharynx	4 <i>anguli</i>
<i>Adhipathi</i>	1	<i>Sadhyapranahara</i>	Venus plexus at the vertex inside the skull, marked morphologically with a whirl of hair	½ <i>anguli</i>
<i>Sthapani</i>	2	<i>Vishalyagna</i>	In between eyebrows	½ <i>anguli</i>
<i>Simanta</i>	5	<i>Kalantharapranahara</i>	Coronal, sagittal, lambdoid sutures of skull	4 <i>anguli</i>

Most of these *marmas* are related to eyes and blood circulation. By activating *marmas* through *shiroabhyanga*, it shows a strong impact on the central nervous system and glands within the brain.

A type of *pitta dosha*, called *alochaka pitta* located in the eye is of two types – *chakshu vaisheshika* and *buddhi vaisheshika*. *Chakshu vaisheshika* maintains well-being of eye whereas *buddhi vaisheshika* monitors higher mental functions like intelligence, memory, etc. *Apanga* and *avartha marma* are related to eye. *Shiroabhyanga* can produce a soothing impact on *budhi vaisheshika alochaka pitta* through these *marmas* and in turn sooth the nervous system. *Chittanasha* is a psychological abnormality caused due to injury to *seemantha marma*. Thus, when the same *marma* is healed through *moordhinintaila* procedures, it may reverse the *chittanasha* that is, it relives stress, anxiety and depression.

*Pranavayu*, *sadhaka pitta* and *tharpaka kapha* are the 3 chief governing sub *doshas* of *shira*. The integrity of their functioning is the key for a perfect body and mind. While their imbalance leads to psychosomatic diseases. Soothing nervous system by soothing *marma* by *shiroabhyanga* procedure will relax these

three sub *doshas*. These in turn will have a relaxing effect over the *vyana vayu*, *ranjaka pitta*, *avalambaka kapha* and *udana vayu* controlling the heart function and circulation. By controlling the *kledaka kapha*, *bodhaka kapha*, *samana vayu*, *ranjaka pitta* and *pachaka pitta* will keep the core metabolism under control. By controlling *apana vayu*, they will keep excretory functions under control and help in regular detoxification of body, by controlling *brajaka pitta* and *vyana vayu*, they will trim the color and complexion. By controlling *sleshaka kapha*, they will maintain musculoskeletal integrity.<sup>(9)</sup>

## RESULTS

The medicated oil applied on scalp gets absorbed into the tissues and shows their effect based on the medicament and the amount of time. Through *shiroabhyanga*, *marma* points of head and neck gets activated and in turn gets a soothing effect. This soothing effect results in soothing of overall nervous system. This also increases the blood circulation and gives relief and relaxation to the person. Thus, provide relief from anxiety, stress, depression, improves hair growth, improves vision, certain psychological condition, etc.

**DISCUSSION**

According to *Ayurveda*, human body is considered to be similar to an upside-down tree, where the roots are at the top and branches are pointing downward. Just as how we take care of the roots to keep the plant healthy, similarly we need to keep the head healthy to keep body healthy. The primary reason for this is that, the *prana* and *indriyas* that control the whole body resides in head. *Shiroabhyanga*, which is a type of *murdhni taila* is a very effective therapeutic measure, which can also be practiced by a healthy person as a part of *dinacharya* (daily regimen) to keep away from diseases. Moreover, the presence of many vital *marma* points in head and their activation through *shiroabhyanga* and massage has an overall effect on central nervous system and circulation.

**CONCLUSION**

*Shiroabhyanga* is the therapeutic measure of application of oil, followed by massage. This procedure is mentioned for two purposes – for maintenance of health in a healthy individual and as a treatment measure in diseased conditions. Since lukewarm oil is used in *shiroabhyanga*, it stimulates *swedavaha srotas* and hence blood circulation increases. And also, as it stimulates *marma* points in head and neck, it soothes the nervous system and gives a relief to whole body.

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