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Abhyanga in Newborn Care: A Review of Ayurvedic Concepts and Contemporary Evidence on Neonatal Massage

Dr Disha Bhatero^{1*}, Dr Pardhv Balene², Dr Jasmine Duggal³

¹ PG Scholar, Department of Kaumarbhritya, Shri Babu Singh Jay Singh Ayurvedic Medical College and Hospital, Farrukhabad, India

² Professor, Department of Kaumarbhritya, Shri Babu Singh Jay Singh Ayurvedic Medical College and Hospital, Farrukhabad, India

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Kaumarbhritya, Shri Babu Singh Jay Singh Ayurvedic Medical College and Hospital, Farrukhabad, India

* Corresponding Author: **Dr. Disha Bhatero**

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Abstract

Neonatal care is a crucial aspect of ensuring healthy growth and development during the early stages of life. In Ayurveda, newborn care is systematically described under *Jatamatra Paricharya*, which includes practices such as *Abhyanga*, *Snana*, and other supportive procedures. Among these, *Abhyanga* is widely recommended as a daily practice to promote physical strength, improve immunity, and support the overall development of the newborn. The most recent studies on neonatal massage have confirmed the physiological and developmental benefits of massage for infants and show parallels with Ayurvedic practices and modern neonatal care. The purpose of the present review is to explore the role of *Abhyanga* in the care of newborns and infants by perusing classical Ayurvedic texts and evaluating the current scientific literature on massage in newborns and infants, as well as the possible mechanisms through which *Abhyanga* promotes growth and development. The present review is based on a thorough literature survey of classical Ayurvedic texts such as the "Charaka Samhita," "Sushruta Samhita," and "Kashyapa Samhita", and their relevant commentaries that mention the practice of newborn and infant care. The literature suggests that *Abhyanga* is an important practice in the care of newborns, as it activates the nervous system, improves blood circulation, increases digestive efficiency through increased vagal activity, and enhances sleep and relaxation. The literature also suggests that massage in newborns increases weight gain, particularly in preterm babies, improves thermoregulation, reduces stress, increases immunity, and also improves neuromuscular development. The classical Ayurvedic texts also mention the benefits of *Abhyanga*, including increased strength, improved complexion, sound sleep, and longevity. *Abhyanga* is a safe, simple, and cost-effective practice that can significantly support neonatal growth and development. Integration of this traditional Ayurvedic practice with modern neonatal care may provide a holistic approach to improving infant health outcomes.

Keywords: Abhyanga, Neonatal Massage, Navjata Shishu Paricharya, Jatamatra Paricharya, Ayurveda, Neonatal Care

1. Introduction

The most critical period in human development is the neonatal period, the first 28-30 days of life^[1]. This stage in the life of the newborn is a period of physiological adaptation, during which the newborn transitions from the intrauterine environment to the external world. The newborn in this period of life is more susceptible to infections and other developmental challenges. Over

the years, various forms of care have been practised in the neonatal period across different cultures and medical traditions. These forms of care have been practised globally for many centuries, and each culture has its own unique approach to caring for the newborn.

The traditional forms of care practised in India have been based on Ayurveda. The traditional forms of care practised in the Indian subcontinent have been described as "*Jatamatra Paricharya*". Ayurveda emphasises gentle and structured care immediately after birth to facilitate the newborn's smooth transition into extra-uterine life. Among the various procedures described, applying oil to the body is particularly important. Classical Ayurvedic literature describes various forms of oil application, including *Parishheka*, *Samvahana*, *Abhyanga*, and *Mardana*^[2]. Among the three, *Abhyanga* has been well established in Ayurveda as a practice with nourishing, strengthening, and rejuvenating effects.

The practice of massaging a newborn with oil has a long history in Indian families' traditions. In many Indian families, the practice of massaging the newborn with oil is common, done by the mothers, grandmothers, or experienced caregivers. Similar traditions are also observed globally. For example, Chinese traditions believe massage harmonises the body's energies, while some African and Latin American cultures associate infant massage with improved strength, health, and protection from illness.^[3]

In recent decades, modern scientific research has begun to examine the physiological and developmental benefits of neonatal massage. Research indicates that a gentle oil massage may help with weight gain, sleep pattern regulation, neuromuscular development, and strengthening the parent-baby relationship.^[4, 5] This is because the massage stimulates nerve endings in the skin, which may, in turn, affect hormone levels. Furthermore, neonatal skin is relatively thin and permeable compared to adult skin, making emollient therapy beneficial in maintaining hydration and protecting the skin barrier against infections and excessive water loss.^[6]

Despite its widespread traditional use, the integration of neonatal massage into evidence-based neonatal care has gained attention only in the last few decades. Researchers have begun investigating standardised massage techniques and evaluating the safety and effectiveness of different oils used during massage. Some studies have indicated that specific oils rich in essential fatty acids may improve skin barrier function and reduce the risk of infections, particularly in premature or low-birth-weight infants.^[7] These findings highlight the potential clinical relevance of traditional practices when evaluated through scientific research.

Thus, the ancient Ayurvedic concept of *Abhyanga* and the modern practice of neonatal massage share several similarities in their objective of promoting healthy growth and development in newborns. As such, it is important to conduct a thorough review of both traditional Ayurvedic literature and scientific evidence to explore the potential role of *Abhyanga* in neonatal healthcare

2. Aim and Objectives

- To review classical Ayurvedic references describing *Abhyanga* in newborn care.
- To analyse the benefits of neonatal massage reported in modern research.

3. Materials and Methods

- Classical Ayurvedic texts consulted (Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, Ashtanga Hridaya, Kashyapa Samhita)
- Databases searched (PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar)

4. Concept of *Abhyanga* in Ayurveda^[8, 9]

In Ayurveda, oil massage is considered an important daily health practice for maintaining physical and mental well-being.^[10] It is traditionally advised as part of Dinacharya (daily regimen)^[11]. In Indian culture, oil massage is also commonly practised on newborn babies, forming an integral part of routine neonatal care in many households. It is adapted according to climatic conditions, geographical variations, and individual requirements. For instance, in colder climates, massage oil is generally warmed before application, whereas in warmer climates, oils may be used at room temperature.^[12] Classical Ayurvedic literature also describes the use of various medicated oils prepared from herbs to promote nourishment and strength. Oils such as sesame oil are traditionally regarded as highly beneficial because of their nourishing and strengthening properties.^[13] Various medicated oils, including *Bala Taila*^[14], *Lakshadi Taila*, *Ashwagandhadi Taila*, and *Balashwagandhadi Taila*, have been described for external application; among them, *Bala Taila* is frequently recommended for infants due to its strengthening and nourishing qualities.^[15]

Classical Ayurvedic texts describe several beneficial effects of regular oil massage, including nourishing body tissues, strengthening, improving skin texture, and promoting sound sleep. It is also traditionally believed to enhance physical development, improve vitality, and support overall growth during early life. The practice is therefore considered not merely a local skin treatment but a therapeutic procedure capable of influencing multiple physiological systems.^[16]

From a physiological perspective, the beneficial effects of oil massage may be explained through both mechanical stimulation and absorption of oil through the skin. The gentle pressure and rhythmic movements used during massage stimulate cutaneous receptors, improve local blood circulation, and help relax muscles and soft tissues.^[17] At the same time, oils containing lipid-soluble and water-soluble components may penetrate through the skin pores and hair follicles, allowing certain active constituents to be absorbed into the superficial circulation. Since the skin barrier of newborns is thinner and more permeable than in adults, topical applications may improve hydration and protect the skin surface.^[18] The lipid nature of oils allows them to interact with the lipoprotein structure of the skin membrane, thereby aiding penetration and providing nourishment to underlying tissues.

In addition to the pharmacological effects of the oil itself, the therapeutic value of massage also lies in the effect of touch. Gentle tactile stimulation has been shown to promote relaxation, improve neuromuscular coordination, and enhance sensory development. The massage process often involves close interaction between the caregiver and the infant, strengthening emotional bonding and providing psychological comfort to the newborn.^[19]

Newborn care is described in detail under the concept of *Navjata Shishu Paricharya*, which provides systematic

guidelines for a smooth transition from intrauterine to extrauterine life. These procedures emphasise gentle and supportive care. Traditional practices described in Ayurveda include various forms of oil application, such as *Parisheka*, *Samvahana*, *Abhyanga*, and *Mardana*. *Parisheka* refers to the practice of oiling the body, usually performed soon after birth. Similarly, *Samvahana* involves gentle rubbing of oil on the body parts, while *Abhyanga* involves systematic application of oil over the entire body with proper pressure and direction.^[20] *Mardana* refers to a deeper massage of muscles using oil or powders. Among these procedures, oil massage has gained considerable importance in neonatal care practices across India and other cultures.

The practice of neonatal oil massage is widely practised across India, though the techniques and oils used may vary by cultural tradition and local availability. In many parts of North India, mustard oil is commonly used for infant massage. In contrast, in South India, coconut oil is frequently preferred, and massage techniques may involve gentle manipulation of specific body points. However, while traditional massage practices are widely followed, certain methods used in some communities may be potentially harmful and therefore require caution. Practices such as forceful stretching of limbs, pulling of ear or nasal cartilage, squeezing of breast nodules, slapping the back during massage, excessive pressure over the abdomen, crossing of arms and legs, or excessive extension of limb joints should be strictly avoided. These actions may lead to serious complications such as choking, cyanosis, joint dislocations, fractures, neurogenic shock, mastitis, or unnecessary pain to the infant. Therefore, neonatal massage should always be performed gently and in a safe, controlled manner to prevent any adverse effects.

From a neonatal care perspective, oil massage may be initiated once the newborn is vitally stable after birth. In healthy infants, it can be performed once daily, usually either in the morning or evening. Morning time is generally considered ideal, provided that the environmental conditions are suitable. The room temperature during the procedure should be maintained above approximately 25°C to prevent hypothermia in the newborn.^[21] Adequate warming arrangements, such as heaters, may be used if necessary. Still, exposure to smoke or fumes from burning substances should be strictly avoided, as they can harm the infant's delicate lungs. Windows should be closed and drafts avoided to maintain a stable, warm environment.

The practice of neonatal oil massage can be continued regularly throughout infancy, often up to the first year of life, provided that the child remains healthy and shows no signs of illness. Selection of the appropriate oil is an important consideration. Sesame oil is regarded as one of the most beneficial vegetable oils due to its nourishing and strengthening properties. Medicated oils prepared by processing sesame oil with herbal ingredients are also described in classical texts. Among these, *Bala Taila* is commonly recommended for infants as it is believed to enhance strength, support tissue nourishment, and help maintain body warmth.

While neonatal massage offers several benefits, certain precautions must always be observed. The procedure should ideally be undertaken after appropriate medical advice and under proper supervision. Special care should be taken around the umbilical cord stump until it falls off and the area heals completely.^[22]

Massage should be avoided immediately after feeding, in infants with hypoglycemia, or in sick newborns who show signs such as lethargy, refusal to feed, convulsions, or respiratory distress, severe jaundice, congenital heart disease associated with cyanosis, or any condition where the baby is vitally unstable or requires oxygen support. In such situations, neonatal massage should be postponed until the infant becomes clinically stable.

5. Physiological Effects of Neonatal *Abhyanga*

Neonatal *Abhyanga* (oil massage) is an important component of traditional infant care, as described in classical texts such as the *Kashyapa Samhita* and the *Ashtanga Hridaya*. It is now also recognised in modern neonatal care for its physiological and psychological benefits.

Regular neonatal massage promotes growth and weight gain^[23], particularly in premature infants, by enhancing vagal tone, improving digestion, and enhancing nutrient absorption. It also helps improve sleep patterns^[24], allowing infants to fall asleep faster and maintain longer, uninterrupted sleep by relaxing the nervous system.^[25]

Massage supports thermoregulation by improving peripheral circulation and reducing heat loss, particularly beneficial for newborns with immature temperature regulation. In addition, tactile stimulation during massage promotes neurological maturation, enhances sensory integration, and improves feeding tolerance and neuromotor development.^[26]

Furthermore, massage supports the immune system and provides therapeutic benefits by reducing stress hormones, improving lymphatic circulation, and assisting with conditions such as neonatal jaundice, procedural pain, and infantile colic. Overall, neonatal *Abhyanga* supports healthy growth, physiological stability, and holistic development in infants.

6. Procedure for Neonatal *Abhyanga*,^[27, 28]

According to Ayurvedic principles, *Abhyanga* should be performed in the *Anuloma* direction, meaning strokes are applied along the direction of hair follicles, typically from the proximal to distal parts of the body. Some classical scholars suggest beginning the massage sequence with the abdomen and chest, followed by the shoulders, upper and lower limbs, and finally the head, neck, and face. Other traditions recommend starting from the head and gradually moving downward toward the trunk and extremities. Circular strokes are generally applied over rounded areas such as the head or joints, while straight strokes are used over long structures such as the arms and legs.

In modern neonatal massage protocols, a typical session lasts approximately 15 minutes and may be divided into three phases. The first and third phases involve tactile stimulation using moderate pressure strokes, while the middle phase includes kinesthetic stimulation through gentle flexion and extension movements of the limbs. During tactile stimulation, the infant is usually placed in a prone position and stroked sequentially from the head to the neck, across the shoulders, from the upper back to the waist, along the legs from thigh to foot, and along the arms from shoulder to hand. During the kinesthetic phase, the infant is placed in a supine position, and the arms and legs are gently flexed and extended, sometimes resembling a bicycling motion. Light-pressure massage resembles the Ayurvedic technique known as *Samvahana*^[29], whereas moderate-pressure massage more closely resembles classical *Abhyanga*.

For performing neonatal *Abhyanga*, the oil should first be warmed slightly by placing the container in warm water and testing it on the caregiver's hand before application. The caregiver should wash hands thoroughly and remove jewellery to prevent injury to the infant's delicate skin. The oil is applied gently over the body and allowed to absorb for a few minutes before the massage begins. Sensitive areas such as the abdomen and chest should be massaged with lighter pressure, while circular strokes can be applied to joints and the scalp. Particular care should be taken to avoid excessive pressure, pulling of limbs, or hyper-flexion and hyper-extension movements.

The soft area of the infant's skull (anterior fontanelle) should not be pressed; oil may be applied lightly.

Massage should ideally be performed in a warm, draft-free environment with a room temperature above 25°C to prevent hypothermia. It is generally recommended to perform the massage when the infant is calm, ideally at least 1 to 2 hours after feeding. After the massage, the infant should rest for 10–15 minutes before bathing with warm water. In healthy newborns, *Abhyanga* can be performed daily, preferably in the morning, and may be continued throughout the first year of life as part of routine infant care.

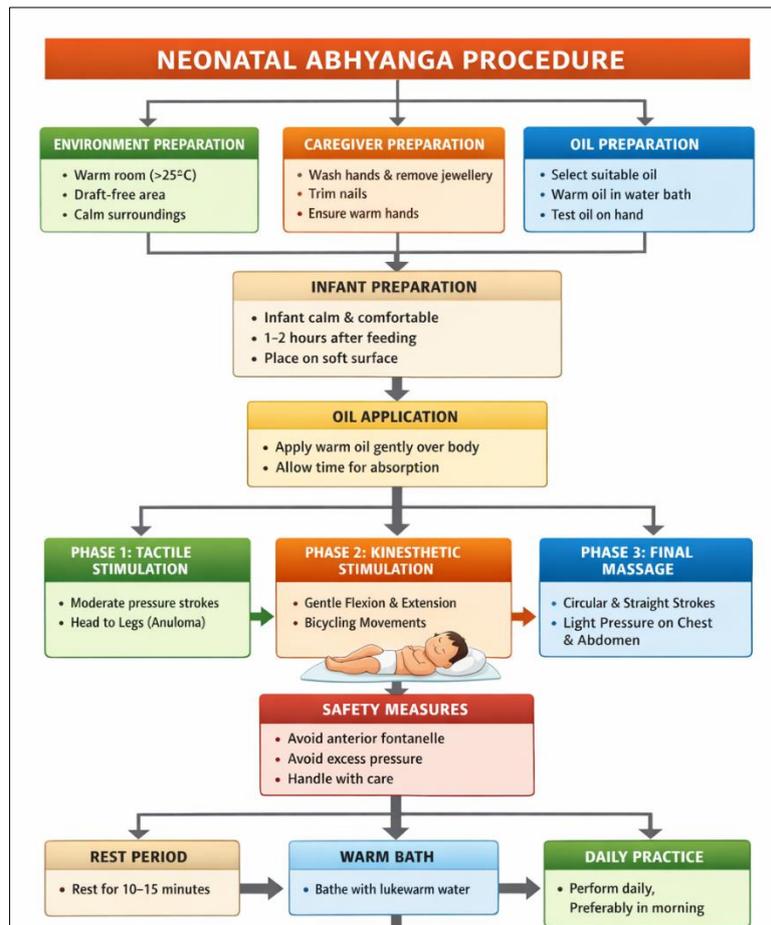


Fig 1: Procedure of Neonatal *Abhyanga*

7. Possible Mechanisms of Action

The beneficial effects of neonatal massage and *Abhyanga* are explained through several physiological and neurobiological mechanisms. Studies suggest that moderate-pressure massage in neonates leads to multiple beneficial effects, including improved weight gain in preterm infants, reduced pain responses, enhanced attentiveness, improved sleep, and strengthened immune function. These effects are believed to occur through stimulation of sensory receptors, improved circulation, hormonal regulation, and enhanced neurodevelopmental responses.

One of the primary mechanisms involves stimulation of cutaneous receptors^[30]. The skin is the body's largest sensory organ, and gentle tactile stimulation activates mechanoreceptors that transmit signals via peripheral nerves to the central nervous system. This sensory input enhances neural activity and contributes to improved behavioural organisation and alertness in infants. From an Ayurvedic

perspective, the application of oil and tactile stimulation during *Abhyanga* nourishes the skin (*Twak*). It stimulates sensory pathways associated with the proper functioning of the sense organs (*Indriya*).

Another important mechanism is improvement in blood circulation and lymphatic flow.^[31] Massage movements enhance peripheral circulation, facilitating better delivery of oxygen and nutrients to tissues. Improved circulation also helps remove metabolic waste and supports tissue nourishment. In newborns, enhanced circulation may improve thermoregulation and skin barrier function. Ayurveda describes similar effects through the nourishing and strengthening properties of *Abhyanga*, which promote *Dhatu Poshana* (*tissue nourishment*) and improve bodily strength (*Bala*).^[32]

Neonatal massage also influences the autonomic nervous system through vagal stimulation^[33], which plays an important role in digestive and metabolic regulation.

Moderate-pressure massage has been shown to increase vagal activity, thereby improving gastric motility, enhancing digestion, and increasing nutrient absorption. These

physiological responses may partly explain the improved weight gain and feeding tolerance observed in infants receiving regular massage therapy.

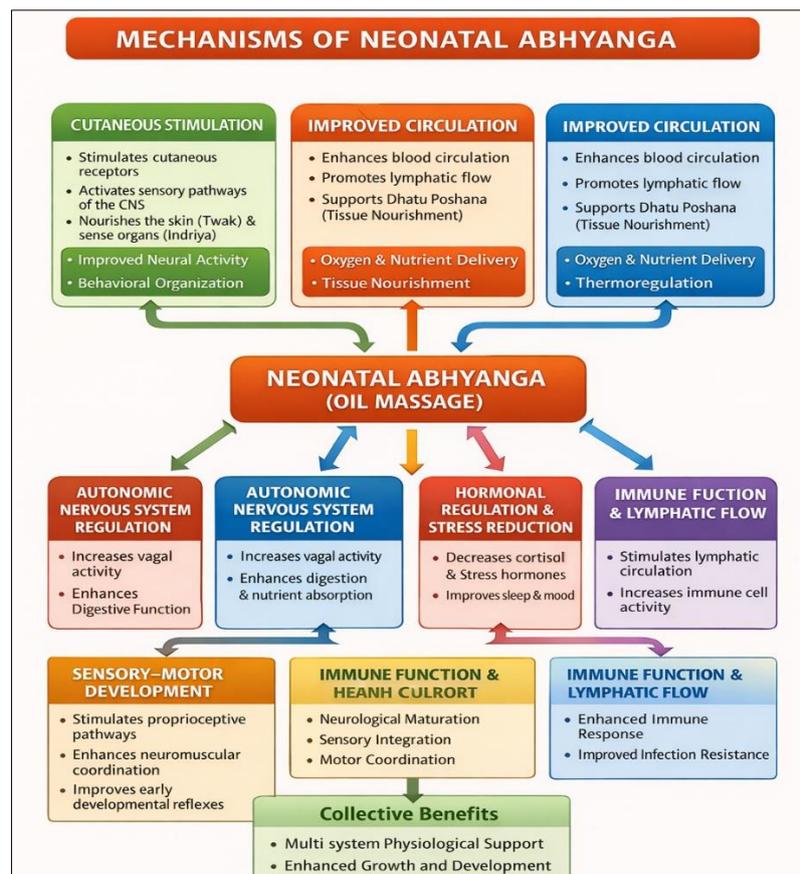


Fig 2: Mechanism of Neonatal Abhyanga

Another important pathway involves hormonal regulation^[34] and stress reduction. Studies have reported that moderate-pressure massage decreases levels of stress hormones such as cortisol while increasing the release of relaxation-related neurotransmitters. Neuroimaging studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging have demonstrated that massage stimulates several brain regions, including the amygdala, hypothalamus, and anterior cingulate cortex, which are involved in emotional regulation and stress responses. These neurophysiological changes contribute to reduced anxiety, improved mood regulation, and better sleep patterns in infants.

Interestingly, many of these mechanisms closely correspond to the principles described in Ayurveda. Classical texts explain that daily *Abhyanga* maintains the balance of *Dosha*, strengthens tissues, improves circulation, and promotes physical and mental well-being. Thus, modern scientific findings provide supportive evidence for the traditional Ayurvedic understanding of neonatal *Abhyanga* as an important preventive and promotive health practice for newborn care.

8. Discussion

Neonatal care has always been an essential component of both traditional and modern health systems. In Ayurveda, newborn care is described under *Jatamatra Paricharya*, which includes procedures such as *Abhyanga*, *Snana*, and *Jatakarma*. Among these, *Abhyanga* occupies a significant place as a daily therapeutic and preventive practice. Although

neonatal massage in modern medicine shares certain similarities with *Abhyanga*, there are notable conceptual and practical differences between the two practices.

The primary difference lies in the method of application. *Abhyanga* is always performed with the application of oil or other *Snigdha Dravya* (unctuous substances), which nourish the skin and underlying tissues while facilitating smooth massage movements. In contrast, modern massage techniques may be performed either with or without lubricants, depending on the therapeutic objective. The use of medicated oils in *Abhyanga* provides additional therapeutic benefits by delivering herbal properties through transdermal absorption, a concept emphasised in classical Ayurvedic texts.

Another important difference concerns the therapeutic role and scope of the procedure. In Ayurveda, *Abhyanga* is an integral component of *Dinacharya* (daily regimen) and is recommended as a routine practice for maintaining health and preventing disease. It is also used as a preparatory procedure before Panchakarma therapies and can serve as a primary therapeutic intervention in several disease conditions. Conversely, modern massage therapy is generally used as a supportive or complementary modality, often integrated with physiotherapy or rehabilitation practices. It is rarely considered a primary treatment method in modern medical practice.

The indications for these procedures also differ. *Abhyanga* is recommended for healthy infants to promote proper growth, strength, and development. It is also beneficial in managing

certain neuromuscular disorders by improving muscle tone and circulation. Modern neonatal massage is similarly used for healthy infants and for those with neuromuscular issues, often as part of physiotherapeutic interventions aimed at enhancing motor development and sensory stimulation.

Similarly, contraindications must be considered before performing these procedures. In Ayurveda, *Abhyanga* is generally avoided in conditions associated with aggravated *Kapha Dosha*, indigestion (*Ajeerna*), or immediately after certain therapeutic procedures such as Panchakarma. Modern massage therapy also has contraindications, including inflammatory conditions, fractures, dislocations, severe sprains, and severe body aches where manipulation may aggravate tissue injury.

From a broader perspective, neonatal massage and *Abhyanga* share the common goal of promoting the healthy development of infants. Touch plays a vital role in early communication between caregivers and infants and is often described as the baby's first language.^[35] Regular *Abhyanga*, or *massage*, helps improve digestion, enhance muscle tone, promote growth, and support neurological development. Increased vagal activity during massage stimulates gastric motility, which may contribute to improved feeding and weight gain in infants. Additionally, massage promotes relaxation and helps establish better sleep patterns in newborns.

Classical Ayurvedic texts also describe several specific benefits of *Abhyanga*, including *Mrjapada* (cleansing the body), *Varnaprada* (improving complexion), *Balavana* (enhancing physical strength), *Swapnakara* (inducing sound sleep), and *Ayushyakara* (promoting longevity). Regular oil massage is also believed to soften and nourish the skin, strengthen muscles and bones, and reduce stress, thereby contributing to both physical and mental well-being.

Conclusion:

While modern neonatal massage and traditional *Abhyanga* share similar therapeutic outcomes, *Abhyanga* represents a more comprehensive health-promoting practice rooted in the preventive and holistic principles of Ayurveda. Integrating these traditional concepts with modern neonatal care practices may provide a more holistic approach to improving infant health and development.

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