

# Ayurvedic Herbal Massage Treatments

By Karta Purkh Singh Khalsa

**N**o one had to tell Marsha Akers that sore feet are occupational hazards for massage therapists. “My feet hurt so bad,” she says, “it was like pieces of glass cutting into them.” Barely into middle age, Akers, who practices in Gresham, Oregon, had to stand on those feet all day long. “Finally, I was diagnosed as having bone spurs. I thought my career was over.” Desperate to try anything, Akers came across an herbal oil from half a world away and decided she had nothing to lose.

## An Ancient Healing System

**A**yurveda, the ancient holistic healing system of India, has a different vision of the healthy human—not just the gradually failing, getting-through-the-day human, but a lively, vibrant being with energy to thrive and excel. Over the centuries, those in the know have explored how we can have that type of radiant good health.

This traditional scheme is a complete approach to health and lifestyle management. It is the ultimate self-care system, and it’s all about prevention. The techniques of ayurvedic self-care are geared toward never allowing a symptom. If one does arise, however, the goal is to bring you back into balance quickly and effectively, so that you don’t have another. Regular massage is a part of that prevention.

Traditional natural healing systems have already worked out this individualized approach. If we dig deep enough, we find them all dipping from the same stream. Ayurveda has worked out the idea that people are different and need to be treated differently, and it has successfully worked out techniques to do just that.

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Ayurveda gives us a measuring tool that people can master and apply. It explains the reason some people get better with one treatment program and others require a different approach. The overarching concept of energy balance

is the glue that holds all the various concepts and methods together, and it is systematic, organized, and straightforward to learn.

Ever wonder if your skin rash, hemorrhoids, diarrhea, balding head, and weak eyesight are connected? Ayurveda will give you the tools to understand the connections and reverse all of these with a new perspective on your life. Armed with the knowledge of how you are put together as an individual, you will be able to select your massage technique, medicated oil, and therapy plan—even the ideal temperature for your office during a session.

### Energetics

People of ancient cultures experienced the natural world in which they lived and sought to develop a way to systematically understand their relationship to it. They reasoned that they were made of the same stuff as the rest of the natural world and were subject to the effects of circumstances in their living environment. Based on centuries of client observations, people came to remarkable conclusions about how human bodies responded to changes in the climate, diet, season of the year, and so forth, and they put together systematic metaphors for how herbs, food, exercise, and bodywork interact with the body and mind of their clients.

Fundamentally, like increases like. In other words, an external factor, when introduced to the body, will create a similar reaction in the body of the person experiencing the change. For example, going out into the cold weather will make the body cold. Eating heavy food will make the body heavy. This seems obvious on the surface, and it is ultimately pretty easy to grasp intuitively, but putting together all the intricacies of every possible effect of every possible herbal remedy on every possible person is a daunting task.

If we think of each of these possible effects, such as temperature or moisture, as an energy, we can put together an explanation of the complexity of what it is to be a human being that is consistent and systematic enough for people to learn and apply in daily life. The cumulative effect of these internal and external factors forms the complex metaphor of ayurvedic energetics.

This metaphor creates a conceptual model that is intricate enough to represent an entire human being, yet simple enough to be useful.

Energetic evaluation of the body is based on experiencing the body with the human senses. According to the ayurvedic system, the sum total of the effect of a therapy is what counts. For example, we may want to use an herbal massage oil to treat a client with an acute inflammatory condition. But we also know that the herb tends to increase body temperature—it is “hypermetabolic,” or hot. If the client has a fever, or is a person who is particularly prone to develop inflammation (heat) that is difficult to control, we would think twice about using that specific remedy—the whole person would be worse off as a net total than before we started. Instead, we would seek out a treatment that had a cooling energy. This difference in approach can make a world of difference in clinical practice and gives us an invaluable tool in managing a case for the best in the long term and in treating the person as a whole human being. We don’t want to make people worse while we think they are getting better.

The art and science of energetics creates an impression from the whole, allowing us to grasp the overall nature of the remedy and predict with great accuracy the expected consequences of its use. Using an energetic system, the properties of all treatments are collated systematically according to their taste, temperature, and density, allowing the practitioner to match the actions and nature of the medicine to the individual client, often referred to as differential diagnosis. A therapist using this paradigm will choose the whole of the treatment, based on the uniqueness of the case, rather than the commonality of the medical diagnosis.

Ayurveda carefully selects massage oils based on these effects:

- **Temperature.** This implies body temperature, but also is generally construed to mean metabolic rate. The spectrum is from hot to cold.
- **Weight.** This is an observation of body weight and also general density of the tissues.
- **Moisture.** This is an observation of the lubricious nature of the body fluids and the degree of fluid retention.

### Massage in Ayurveda

Ayurveda has a five thousand-year history of using unique, sophisticated massage techniques as integrated parts of a total healing system. Ayurveda uses massage therapy as a foundation treatment, not just for musculoskeletal disorders, but for virtually all conditions—even the most serious. Depending on the specifics of the treatment—such as the precise oil (often with infused medicinal herbs), the temperature of the treatment room, the depth and intensity of the treatment, the body region worked, and the session length—ayurvedic massage can treat just about any tissue or function.

All therapy in ayurveda revolves around the behavior of the body energies. As practitioners, our goal is to

restore balance by offsetting the energetics. So, for example, if the symptoms are cold, slow, wet, and heavy (obesity, chest congestion, diabetes, etc.), our massage strategy will be to offset the prevailing energy with warming, active, rough, dry techniques and lubrication media.<sup>1</sup>

Ideally, ayurveda recommends a massage with oil before exercise to increase lubrication in the tissues before the movement. After exercise, when you are cooling down, you could have another massage with a dry, powdered lubricant, such as selected powdered herbs, to absorb the wastes on the skin and stimulate the tissues. The massage should be followed with a shower to remove the herbal powder.

Ayurveda gives special care to selecting oils and other massage media. Each oil is seen as having specific therapeutic properties and is chosen according to the individual client and her relative energy balance at the time.

Oil massage (*abhyanga*) is performed with much larger quantities of oil than Western styles. This oil is very important to the medicinal aspect of the therapy. The oil is food and medicine and must nourish the tissues properly, so the preparation is chosen specifically as medicine. The most common, broadly beneficial oil is sesame, with almond as a second choice, so most medicated oils are in a sesame oil base. The goal is to get as much medicated oil to penetrate the tissues as possible to pacify the energy being treated.<sup>2</sup>

The choice of massage oil depends on the energetics of the individual client. If the client is metabolically cool, oily, and heavy, with a tendency toward edema, we might use mustard, corn, jojoba, olive, and safflower, which bring balance to this energetic profile. If the client is hot and oily, with a tendency toward inflammation, we could choose between coconut, pumpkin seed, rice bran, safflower, sandalwood, and sunflower, which are cooling. If the client is cold and dry, with a tendency toward stiffness and constipation, we might use avocado, castor, olive, or wheat germ oils, which are moisturizing and warming.

Ayurveda has a trove of sophisticated remedies to offer. With a little study, a talented massage therapist can bring a whole new dimension to the work of healing.

### Castor Oil—The Arnica of Ayurveda

Grandma might have given you castor oil as a laxative, but ayurveda recognizes castor as a wonderful panacea for a large number of health concerns.<sup>3</sup> For Akers, it was a modern day miracle. “I ended up soaking my feet in warm castor oil each night for thirty minutes,” she says. “The relief was immediate and continued to increase each night. Two weeks later, I was pain-free for the first time in months.”

Known as Palma Christi (hand of Christ) in the West, castor oil is pungent, heavy, and sweet, with heating energy. Applied externally, it is analgesic and

restores nerve tissue, so it is the main treatment for nerve conditions.<sup>4</sup>

Castor oil is the primary treatment for cold, dry conditions, including constipation and osteoarthritis. The Chinese also use it for joint pain.<sup>5</sup> Following this logic, this special oil is used in the treatment of epilepsy, paralysis, neuralgia, foot neuropathy, sciatica, and many other nervous system disorders. Castor oil supports joint, muscle, connective tissue, and skin health.

Castor oil, the “arnica of ayurveda,” helps to heal tissue trauma and treats damaged structural and connective tissue and wounds, preventing bruising. It is not designed for acute pain relief, although it is superb for the chronic pain associated with fibromyalgia or osteoarthritis.

Castor oil works rapidly and effectively to prevent and reverse tissue injury. It is tissue-tightening and helps to stabilize hypermobile joints, such as neck subluxations. It reduces benign masses and swellings, including ovarian cysts, breast cysts, varicose veins, swollen lymph glands, enlarged liver or spleen, and lipomas. The gentle application of castor oil to the lactating mother’s breasts improves her secretion of milk.

Apply castor oil to large areas of nerve involvement or organ dysfunction, such as an involved leg, or as an abdominal pack for an affected liver, menstrual pain, constipation, or general abdominal discomfort. Use it on burns, bedsores, rashes, skin itch, cracked heels, bruises, sprains, strains, hemorrhoids, anal fissures, torn cuticles, and minor cuts or wounds.<sup>6</sup>

The leaves are poisonous, but they may be steamed and applied externally to relieve pains from bruises, injuries and stiffness, aches and pains, rheumatism, arthritis, lumbago, and bursitis.

It can also be applied to infected skin, including warts and fungus, or as a spot treatment for pimples or stretch marks. In ayurveda, castor oil is used in the treatment of disorders of the nervous system, including epilepsy and paralysis.

Castor oil, however, is extremely messy. Traditionally, it is applied as a moist pack, but compliance becomes a big problem when the client is faced with the mess. A water-soluble gel, castor oil ointment is a convenient alternative. It penetrates completely, leaving no residue.

Use it on specific areas of trauma (anal irritation, etc.). Allow it to remain and soak in as long as possible. Apply it in an abdominal pack for ovarian cysts or liver detoxification. Use it as a breast pack for benign breast cysts. To prevent bruising, apply the castor oil immediately after trauma, allowing it to remain overnight or for several hours. →





The energetic characteristics of castor oil are a good match with the typical fibromyalgia client. The treatment tends to be a little on the slow side in fibromyalgia, but long-term use can be very effective.

Though Akers' pain episode was nine years ago, the pain hasn't returned, she says. "I feel great, and best of all, I

still keep going full time in my busy massage practice, where I'm known for my liberal use of—you guessed it—castor oil."

### Ghee—The Miracle for Inflammation

**G**hee, or clarified butter from which milk solids have been removed, is a cornerstone massage remedy, and is a premier anti-inflammatory topical. Apply ghee to hot spots from athletic injuries or inflamed arthritic joints.

Ghee, as a massage base, benefits sensitive skin. Ayurveda is known for recommending ghee, sometimes mixed with honey, as an application for wounds, inflammation, and blisters.

*Shata Dhaut Ghrita* (ghee that has been washed one hundred times) is a traditional preparation made from ghee. Hundred times washed ghee is prepared from organic cow milk ghee by washing it in water, repeatedly, one hundred times, using a specific prescribed method.

This procedure transforms the ghee into a soft, cooling, nourishing, silky unguent that is used as a traditional moisturizer and antiwrinkle skin cream. It produces radiant and glowing skin, especially for people with easily inflamed skin. It can be used as a daily face and body moisturizer or for facial massage. Apply it for sunburn, eczema, and rosacea.

### Medicated Ghee Preparations

**I**ndia is a tropical country, and in the hotter areas, it's difficult to sun dry herbs in the conventional way, as they mold from the humidity. Ayurveda has concocted numerous low technology methods to preserve the active ingredients from plants. Medicated ghee (*ghrita* in Sanskrit), is just such a method.

Herbs are simmered in ghee and water until the water evaporates. The spent herb is removed. That way, the fat soluble and the water soluble herb constituents are extracted and remain in the ghee. Every trace of water must be removed or spoilage may occur. Ghee is self-preserving, requiring no refrigeration, so medicated ghee lasts forever, if cared for well. Medicated ghee may be used internally or externally.

Most medicated ghee preparations are for inflammatory conditions. For example, the well-known brahmi ghrita contains the popular herb gotu kola, which can be used for inflamed skin.

*Shatavari ghrita*, which balances female hormones, is made by simmering one part shatavari root in four parts ghee, eight parts water, and eight parts milk (or just sixteen parts water), over a low heat until all the water is evaporated and only the medicated ghee remains.

### Narayan Oil—The Bengay of Ayurveda

**N**arayan oil is the leading musculoskeletal treatment oil in ayurveda. It is really a concept, or category, more than a specific formula, and there are many brands and variations. Generally it contains essential oils in a neutral oil base, usually sesame oil. The essential oils have heating and cooling effects. Typical essential oils are peppermint, eucalyptus, and clove.

A complicated traditional formula includes sesame oil, bala (*Sida cordifolia*), ashwaganda (*Withania somnifera*), boswellia gum (*Boswellia serrata*), guggul gum (*Commiphora mukul*), wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*), calamus (*Acorus calamus*), licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), triphala (*Three myrobalan fruits*), angelica (*Angelica archangelica*), prickly ash (*Xanthoxylum spp.*), shilajit (Mineral pitch), fenugreek (*Trigonella foenumgraceum*), turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*), nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*), clove (*Caryophyllus aromaticus*), camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*), myrrh (*Commiphora molmol*), tea tree oil, and jivan oil.

This invigorating oil increases circulation and decreases pain. It is classic for osteoarthritis.

### Cooling Massage Oils Quench the Fire

**A**mla fruit (*Emblica officinalis*) is the main anti-inflammatory herb for chronic conditions. It appears in many herbal oils for hot conditions. Amla massage oil (sesame, amla fruit, long pepper, guduchi) is used for joint inflammation and inflamed scalp conditions.

Amla commonly appears with the main herb for hair health, bringraj leaf (*Eclipta alba*), in medicinal hair preparations, as inflammation is the main process that foils hair growth and health. Bringraj scalp oil often contains sesame, bringraj, amla, bibitaki, and brahmi.

The brahmi-amlam combination brings two cooling herbs to hot tissues. A complex formula for a very cooling massage oil includes sesame, bilwa, brahmi, amla, ashwaganda, kanta kari, gokshura, bala, neem, punarnava, atibala, agnimantha, prasarani, patal twak, shatavari, mishreya, jatamansi, turmeric, daruharidra, shailja, sandalwood, pushkarmool, cardamom, manjistha, licorice, valerian, nutgrass, tejpatra, bringraj, jiwak, calamus, and kama duda. →

### Dashmula Oil—Soothing Warmth

**D**ashmula is the famous “ten roots” formula. A wonderful, warming infused oil with these ten warming roots is used in cold conditions, such as osteoarthritis. It is also useful for anorexia, constipation, anemia, body ache, coughing and breathing problems, pharyngitis, and vertigo.

As is common with ayurvedic formulas, this formula may contain ingredient variations from different sources. It includes pipramool, the root of long pepper—a close relative of black pepper. The usual ingredients include *Tribulus terrestris*, *Aegle marmelos*, *Desmodium gangeticum*, *Vraria picta*, *Solanum surratense*, *Solanum indicum*, *Premna mucronata*, *Oroxylum indicum*, *Umelina arborea*, and *Stereospermum suaveolens*.



#### Preparing Ashwaganda Ghee

Method 1  
(simple procedure)  
Simmer ashwaganda (typically 1 part) and ghee (typically 4 parts) together. Strain. Bottle. No water remaining.

Method 2  
(traditional ayurvedic procedure)  
Place in pan together:  
1 part herb  
4 parts ghee  
16 parts water  
Gently heat, stirring occasionally, until all water evaporated. Strain.

Method 3  
(Best yield)  
Decoct oil and water phases separately. Combine. Simmer to remove all water.

### Garbanzo Packs—More Than a Skin Treatment

**U**btan is a paste made from grains, beans, nuts, or flowers, to which oils and herbs have been added. Garbanzo flour is the usual base. This ubtan paste is used as a health and beauty treatment for the skin. The paste is applied about one quarter inch thick, then allowed to remain on the skin for thirty minutes or so, where it may dry. After the beauty massage, the paste is removed in a cool bath, which sometimes contains a little lemon juice, rose water, yogurt, or sandalwood.

Ubtan formulas vary widely. They often contain turmeric, saffron, sandalwood, or ground mustard seeds. Ubtan may be used daily in place of soap.

Ubtan for sensitive skin often is based on garbanzo and may contain cooling ghee and amla. Ubtan for dry skin may be based on wheat flour and may contain sesame oil. Ubtan for oily skin may be a mix of garbanzo powder and triphala powder or a water-based paste of powdered triphala only.

#### Whole Body Massage Ubtan

1 tbsp garbanzo flour  
1 tsp mustard oil  
¼ tsp turmeric powder  
Water to form paste, as needed

#### Beautiful Skin Herbal Ubtan

1 tbsp garbanzo flour  
1 tsp mustard oil  
¼ tsp turmeric powder  
¼ tbs fenugreek powder  
Water to form paste, as needed

### Ashwaganda—Nature’s Stamina Remedy

**A**shwaganda root (*Withania somnifera*) is ayurveda’s main tonic herb and may be used as a medicated oil or ghee. The intent is to apply enough that the herb enters the body and has tonifying effects. Just about any tired body can benefit from the gentle strength-giving effects of ashwaganda oil. It is often found in a sesame complex of several herbs, including kamla, malti pushp, madhukayasti, anantmul, padmakesara, maida, punarnava, draksha, manjishta, badi kateli, choti elachi, elva, haritaki, bibitaki, amla, musta, and padmaka.

### Brahmi Oil—Nature’s Nerve Remedy

**B**rahmi leaf (*Centella asiatica*), also called gotu kola, is the main herb for nerve tissue. As discussed, it may be used in ghee, but it is also common in oil. Since brahmi is cooling, the fresh leaves are infused into cooling coconut oil. Guduchi, manjishta, haritaki, and saffron will also be included in the formula.

Brahmi massage is used for degenerate nerve conditions, including neuropathy, traumatic injury, and multiple sclerosis.

### Dry Powder Massage—No Oily Sheets!

**P**eople with oily bodies don’t usually get oil massages. Instead, we use finely ground, dry herbal powders as the lubricating medium. This is a new experience for most therapists, but a little experimentation might pay off. This dry method is detoxifying and stimulating for the skin and does not contribute to the already excessive oil burden. Common powders include corn, fenugreek seed, garbanzo, millet, and the triphala herb combination, which is the most widely used formula in ayurveda. Dry powder massage requires a lot more lubricating powder than most therapists are used to, so pile it on.

## Yogurt—Ayurveda's Star Beauty Treatment

Yogurt soothes the skin and detoxifies the tissue. Use it plain as a massage medium, or use it for self-massage in a bath.

Herbal yogurt combinations abound in ayurveda. For example, as an antiwrinkle and general skin treatment, turmeric, yogurt, garbanzo flour, ginger powder, and lemon juice are applied all over the body, massaged in thoroughly, and allowed to dry before washing off with plain water.<sup>7</sup>

Another similar skin treatment involves three-day-old yogurt, lemon juice, vinegar, and sulfur.<sup>8</sup>

## Ayurvedic Massage for Osteoarthritis

Osteoarthritis is the classic cold, dry, and degenerative condition. Massage for osteoarthritis should be done in a warm room, with warming oils. The focus should be on gentle increase of joint range of motion. Since osteoarthritis clients have a lack of oily, lubricating “slime” in the tissues, lubricating oil should be used liberally. The client should not feel any pain.

Olive oil is a particularly good medium for osteoarthritis. Mustard oil—a warming preparation—is also a good choice. Narayan oil is a centuries-old remedy for arthritis massage.

Of course, pain is the first symptom that comes to mind when most people think about the misery of arthritis. But it turns out not to be the case for those who have the disorder.<sup>9</sup> Lost sleep is among the main grievances of arthritis victims, according to a study from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill researchers.<sup>10</sup> It's the leading reason they seek medical care. Sleep disruption overshadows problems such as reduced mobility, fewer visits to family and friends, and missing work or favorite recreational activities. Since massage therapy is renowned for promoting sleep, it can have a dramatic benefit in sleep loss from osteoarthritis. Soothing, warming techniques fit the bill.

Clove oil preparations, when applied topically, are superb for enhancing the neurological response of the muscle and can also be used in neuromuscular diseases. Ginger oil is the counterpart to clove, suppressing the nerve signal, and is used on muscles in spasm.

Counter-irritation, the experience of “fooling” pain by generating a superficial feeling of cold or heat over a sore area, has been known for centuries. Counter-irritants include mint oil, wintergreen oil, camphor, eucalyptus oil, and turpentine oil, which arouse or irritate nerve endings, distracting the body's attention from musculoskeletal pain. Used appropriately, they are generally quite safe.

## Taking it to the Table

Ayurveda is systematic and user-friendly. If you dig in a little, you will find the methods easy to understand and logical to apply. As you proceed, ayurvedic

### Cold, wet, oily conditions

#### Oils

Almond  
Corn  
Jojoba  
Mustard  
Olive  
Safflower  
Sesame  
Vitamin A

### Inflamed conditions

#### Oils

Almond  
Calendula  
Coconut  
Pumpkin seed  
Rice bran  
Safflower  
Sandalwood  
Sunflower

### Cold, dry conditions

#### Oils

Almond  
Amla  
Avocado  
Bala  
Castor  
Olive  
Sesame  
Wheat germ

### Dry Powders

Blue corn/ corn  
Fenugreek seed  
Garbanzo  
Millet  
Triphala (herb combination)

### Dry Powders

Barley  
Fenugreek seed  
Garbanzo  
Rice  
Triphala (herb combination)

### Dry Powders

Fenugreek seed  
Garbanzo  
Lentil  
Oat  
Triphala (herb combination)

### Essential Oils

Basil, Tulsi (Holy basil)  
Camphor  
Eucalyptus  
Frankincense  
Lemon  
Peppermint  
Rosemary  
Sage

### Essential Oils

Gardenia  
Jasmine  
Lavender  
Lotus  
Rose  
Saffron  
Sandalwood  
Vertivert

### Essential Oils

Cedarwood  
Geranium  
Juniper  
Lavender  
Myrrh  
Patchouli  
Sage  
Tulsi (Holy basil)

energy balancing will come through as organized, consistent, and eminently useful.

There's much to learn, and it can be easy, fun, and most importantly, effective beyond even what you might imagine. Ayurvedic massage will help you change the way clients see health, disease, medicine, and healing. And it will tangibly impact what you can do about it day to day.

Generate your enthusiasm, organize your technique, and deliver your best essence, and your practice will flow with grace, power, tranquility, effectiveness, and joy. **M&B**

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## Notes

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