

PANCHAKARMA PATHWAYS TO PEACEFUL SLEEP: AYURVEDIC APPROACHES
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ABSTRACT

Sleep is recognized in Ayurveda as a fundamental pillar of health and well-being. Modern lifestyles, characterized by stress, anxiety, and irregular dietary habits, have contributed to the high prevalence of insomnia. Stressful life events and certain personality traits further increase susceptibility to sleep disturbances. In Ayurvedic philosophy, the three doshas—Vata, Pitta, and Kapha—form the *Tristhambha*, or three pillars of life, while the Trayopasthambhas—*Aahara* (diet), *Nidra* (sleep), and *Brahmacharya* (abstinence)—serve as supporting pillars. Among these, sleep is essential for maintaining physiological and psychological balance, and its disruption can lead to multiple health complications. Ayurveda offers a range of therapies for managing *Nidranasha* (insomnia), as outlined by classical Acharyas. These include *Snehana* (oleation), *Abhyanga* (therapeutic massage), *Samvahana* (gentle massage), *Murdhnitaila* (oil therapy on the head), *Padaabhyanga* (foot massage), *Shirobasti* (oil retention therapy on the head), *Shirodhara* (continuous oil pouring on the forehead), and *Nasya* (nasal administration of medicated oils), all of which aim to restore balance and promote restful sleep.

KEYWORDS: Ayurveda, Panchakarma, Anidra, Dosha.**INTRODUCTION**

Among the **Trayopasthambhas**, *Nidra* (sleep) is recognized as one of the essential supportive pillars of life.^[1] Vata and Pitta are the primary doshas contributing to *Anidra* (insomnia).^[2] *Aswapna* is classified under *Vataja Nanatmaja Vikaras*, characterized by reduced quantity of sleep, while increased Pitta is considered responsible for *Alpa Nidra*, affecting the quality of sleep.^[3] Both *Alpa Nidra* and *Nidranasha* correspond closely to the modern concept of insomnia.^[4] According to a WHO survey, approximately 35% of respondents in India report mild to severe difficulty in sleeping. Insomnia significantly impacts social, occupational, and overall functioning.^[5] Insomnia may be classified as **acute**, lasting from a single night to a few weeks, or **chronic**, occurring at least three nights per week for three months or longer.

Types of Insomnia

1. Primary insomnia
2. Secondary insomnia

Causes of Primary Insomnia

- Major life events such as job loss, bereavement, divorce, or relocation
- Environmental factors like noise, light, or temperature disturbances
- Changes in sleep schedule, including jet lag, shift work, or maladaptive habits

Causes of Secondary Insomnia

- Mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety
- Medications for colds, hypertension, asthma, or depression
- Pain or discomfort at night
- Substance use, including caffeine, tobacco, or alcohol
- Endocrine disorders such as hyperthyroidism

Ayurveda identifies additional causes of *Nidranasha*, including improper dietary habits, excessive exercise, fasting, and emotional disturbances such as anger, fear,

anxiety, excessive joy, sorrow, or agitation. Improper sleep may increase the risk of metabolic disorders such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, or cardiovascular disease.

Classical texts such as **Charaka Samhita** and **Ashtanga Sangraha** describe *Anidra* under *Nanatmaja Vatavyadhi* and as a manifestation of *Pitta Vruddhi*. **Sushruta Samhita** attributes its causation to vitiated Vata and Pitta but does not classify it as a separate disease. Various Acharyas recommend therapeutic interventions for *Nidranasha*, including *Snehana* (oleation), *Abhyanga* (therapeutic massage), *Samvahana* (gentle massage), *Murdhnitaila* (oil therapy on the head), *Padaabhyanga* (foot massage), *Shirobasti* (oil retention therapy on the head), *Shirodhara* (forehead oil therapy), and *Nasya* (nasal therapy).^[6]

AETIOPATHOGENESIS OF ANIDRA

Causes of Anidra

Anidra may result from multiple factors, including **Ahara** (diet), **Vihara** (lifestyle/activities), **Manasika** (emotional factors), and **other Nidanas** (miscellaneous causative factors). Improper treatment (Chikitsa Atiyoga) can also contribute. Its causation is generally multifactorial.

Aharaja Nidana (Dietary Factors)

Ayurveda emphasizes the close relationship between diet and sleep. Consumption of foods with antagonistic qualities, such as *Ruksha* (dry), *Laghu* (light), and *Teekshna* (sharp), can lead to *Anidra*. These dietary factors disturb both the physical doshas and the mind (*Manodosha*), causing *Vata Vruddhi*, *Kapha Kshaya*, and *Rajo Guna* imbalance.

Viharaja Nidana (Lifestyle Factors)

- Excessive exposure to smoke, intense heat, or dry conditions may vitiate Vata and Pitta, inducing *Anidra*.
- Overindulgence in physical activity (*Vyayama*), sexual activity (*Vyavaya*), or fasting (*Upavasa*) can aggravate Vata and reduce *Kapha*.
- Unsuitable sleeping conditions (*Asukha Shayya*), such as inadequate bedding or environment, disrupt sleep.
- Excessive engagement in mental or physical work diverts the mind from sleep, causing imbalances in both body and mind.

Manasika Nidana (Emotional Factors)

Psychological factors such as fear (*Bhaya*), anger (*Krodha*), and grief (*Shoka*) can vitiate doshas and contribute to *Anidra*. Emotional disturbances during other mental disorders like *Apasmara*, *Vishada*, or *Chittodvega* may also precipitate insomnia.^[7]

SYMPTOMS OF INSOMNIA (ANIDRA)

- **Vata-type insomnia:** Difficulty falling asleep or waking between 2–4 a.m. and struggling to return to sleep until after 6 a.m.
- **Pitta-type insomnia:** Inability to sleep before 2 a.m., hyperarousal, irritability, disturbing dreams, often associated with acid reflux.
- **Kapha-type insomnia:** Unusual in Kapha, but may present as early morning awakening (around 6 a.m.) or feeling sluggish after adequate sleep; conditions like sleep apnea may be involved.^[8]

CHIKITSA APACHARA (IMPROPER TREATMENT MODALITIES)^[10]

1. Abhyanga (oil application),
2. Moordhnithaila (oil application on head).
3. Gatrasyaudwartana (rubbing the body with powders).
4. Hitamsamvahana (gentle rubbing of the body).
5. Shali (rice), Godhooma (wheat), Pistanna (foods prepared by flours).
6. Foods prepared with Ikshu (sugarcane), Ksheera (milk), Go
7. Ghrita (Cow-Ghee).
8. Madhura, snigdha bhojana (sweet and unctous foods).
9. Mamsa rasa of Vileshaya and Vishkira animals (meat soup).
10. Draksha (grapes), Sita (candy sugar).
11. Ikshu (sugarcane) and its various preparations at night.
12. Pleasant and soft Shayana (mattress) and seatings, yana (vehicle).

PANCHAKARMA UPACHARA

Virechana, Basti, Nasya, Shiro Abhyanga, Shiro Dhara, Shiro Basti, Shiro Pichu, Pada Abhyanga. Bramhi Vati, Sarswatarista, Aswagandharista, Bramhi Ghrita, Smritisagar Ras Brahmi Rasayan.

- Abhyanga & Samvahana (massage), Utsadana, Udvartana (Rubbing medicated paste & powder), Snana (bath), Karnapurana & Akshitarpan, Shirobhyanga & Padabhyanga are desirable for best results in the management of sleep disorders.^[11,12]
- Shirodhara with medicated oils proves beneficial.^[13]
- Takra dhara for daily 45 minutes for 14 days & Pichu with Kshirbala taila/Himasagara tail promotes peaceful sleep.
- Murdhataila: Anointing the head with oils is of four kinds Abhaynga (massage with oil over the head) pariseka (poring oil over the head) pichu (putting a cloth soaked in oil over the head) and Basti (making the oil to stand on the head) each succeeding one stronger than its proceeding.^[14]
- For **Vata-related insomnia (Vataja Anidra)**, Ayurvedic herbs such as **Ashwagandha**, an adaptogen that reduces cortisol levels, and **Vidari** are recommended to calm Vata. Foods rich in calcium and magnesium, including milk, almonds,

kelp, and brewer's yeast, serve as natural sedatives and help promote restful sleep.

- In **Pitta-related insomnia (Pittaja Anidra)**, it is advised to consume Pitta-pacifying foods and apply cooling oils such as coconut or Bhringaraj oil. Drinking calming herbal teas like tulsi, chamomile, or coriander while avoiding alcohol and caffeine can further support sleep.
- For **Kapha-related insomnia (Kaphaja Anidra)**, a Kapha-pacifying regimen is beneficial. Self-massage with mustard oil or Til Taila before bedtime is recommended. Alongside these dietary and herbal interventions, therapies like **Abhyanga (therapeutic massage)**, **Shirodhara (forehead oil therapy)**, and individualized lifestyle modifications play a key role in treatment. Equally important is the practice of mental relaxation techniques to reduce stress and enhance sleep quality.^[9]

DISCUSSION

Elderly individuals are particularly vulnerable to both physical and mental health issues due to age-related changes, socio-economic challenges such as reduced family support, and decreased financial independence. Sleep disturbances in older adults—such as **Alpa Nidra**, **Khandit Nidra**, and **Anidra (Nidranasha)**—are often underrecognized by physicians. Factors contributing to insomnia in this population include suppressed emotions, irregular sleep patterns, stress, anger, excessive excitement, and general ill health.^[15] Sleep timing is regulated by the **suprachiasmatic nucleus** of the hypothalamus, which responds to light and induces sleepiness at night. Disturbances in sleep can lead to physiological changes, including reduced production of hormones such as growth hormone, and impaired metabolic functioning.^[16] A comprehensive preventive approach for sleep disorders in the elderly should include disease awareness, lifestyle education, balanced nutrition, and dietary management to support overall well-being.

CONCLUSION

Ayurvedic management of sleep disorders (Anidra) is individualized, depending on the underlying causes and the imbalances of doshas. Treatment aims to restore harmony among the doshas and promote natural sleep. Interventions may include **Panchakarma therapies**, **internal medications**, **Rasayana therapies**, **yoga**, **meditation**, **aromatherapy**, **pranayama**, and lifestyle modifications encompassing diet, daily routine, and stress management. Integrating these practices provides a holistic approach to improving sleep quality and overall health.

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