

EFFICACY OF PANCHAKARMA THERAPIES IN CHRONIC DISEASE CARE: AN AYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Panchakarma is a cornerstone of Ayurveda, designed for internal purification and the holistic management of health disorders. In the face of a global surge in chronic diseases-such as diabetes, cardiovascular ailments, autoimmune disorders, arthritis, and neurodegenerative conditions-the limitations of symptomatic modern treatments have made room for integrative and preventive approaches. Panchakarma offers a multidimensional approach that goes beyond symptom management to address the root causes of chronic diseases through detoxification, lifestyle correction, and rejuvenation. Panchakarma, through its five-pronged therapeutic regimen (1- Vamana-therapeutic emesis, 2- Virechana-purgation, 3- Basti-medicated enema, 4- Nasya-nasal administration, 5- Raktamokchana-blood letting), addresses disease at the root level by eliminating accumulated toxins (Ama), correcting doshic imbalances, and rejuvenating bodily tissues. Evidence-

based approaches in Ayurveda are gradually gaining traction, and numerous clinical and observational studies have started validating the efficacy of Panchakarma therapies. Studies

demonstrate significant clinical outcomes in chronic diseases when Panchakarma is integrated with diet, lifestyle, and herbal medications. This paper evaluates and compiles the current clinical evidence supporting the efficacy of Panchakarma in managing chronic diseases, including metabolic syndrome, osteoarthritis, autoimmune disorders, and neurological conditions.

The review also explores the mechanisms through which Panchakarma modulates the immune response, improves gut microbiota, enhances metabolism, and restores homeostasis. Research methodologies, challenges in standardization, and the need for integrating traditional knowledge with modern clinical frameworks are also discussed. This evidence-based synthesis aims to bridge traditional Ayurvedic wisdom with contemporary clinical demands, presenting Panchakarma as a complementary and robust system for managing chronic disease management.

Recent advancements in research methodology and interdisciplinary collaboration have allowed rigorous clinical and experimental evaluations of Panchakarma's effects. This paper explores the evidence-based clinical outcomes of Panchakarma in managing chronic diseases, integrating classical Ayurvedic principles with modern biomedical findings.

KEYWORDS: Panchakarma Therapies, Chronic Disease Care, Ayurveda, Panchakarma, Chronic Disease.

INTRODUCTION

Chronic diseases are health conditions that develop slowly, last for a long time, and usually need ongoing medical care rather than a quick cure.^[1] They are among the leading causes of mortality and disability worldwide. The burden of lifestyle disorders like diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, arthritis, and chronic respiratory diseases is increasing globally. Despite advancements in biomedicine, current therapies largely focus on symptomatic relief, often neglecting long-term resolution and overall quality of life. Ayurveda, India's traditional system of medicine, offers a distinct perspective—addressing not only the disease but also the individual as a whole.

The Burden of Chronic Disease

Chronic diseases are among the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide, accounting for nearly 71% of all global deaths, as per the World Health Organization (WHO).^[2] In the Indian context, epidemiological estimates indicate that approximately 21% of the geriatric demographic is afflicted with at least one chronic morbidity.^[3] This prevalence exhibits a rural–urban gradient, with reported rates of nearly 17% in rural populations and escalating to about 29% among their urban counterparts. Notably, hypertension and diabetes mellitus collectively constitute an estimated 68% of the total chronic disease burden within this age group.^[4] These conditions often involve long disease duration, require ongoing medical attention, and limit daily functioning. Conventional treatment approaches largely focus on controlling symptoms and slowing progression, often overlooking the body's innate capacity to heal.^[5]

Ayurveda and Panchakarma

Ayurveda, the 5000-year-old Indian system of medicine, emphasizes a preventive, primitive, and curative approach.^[6] Panchakarma, which translates to “five actions/ Procedures,” is the purification branch of Ayurveda aimed at removing toxins and restoring the equilibrium of the Tridosha (Vata, Pitta, and Kapha).^[7]

The five therapeutic components include

Vamana (therapeutic emesis) - Primarily indicated for Kapha disorders like obesity, asthma, and chronic allergies. It helps expel excess mucus and correcting metabolic sluggishness.

- 1. Virechana (purgation):** Suitable for Pitta disorders such as skin diseases, liver conditions, and inflammatory bowel diseases. It promotes detoxification through the gastrointestinal tract.
- 2. Basti (medicated enema):** Considered the most important Panchakarma therapy for Vata disorders like arthritis, neurological diseases, and degenerative conditions. It includes Niruha (decoction enema) and Anuvasana (oil enema).
- 3. Nasya (nasal administration):** Useful in conditions like migraine, sinusitis, cervical spondylosis, and various neurological problems. Delivers medicated oils or powders through the nasal route.

4. Raktamokshana (bloodletting): Indicated blood-borne and skin disorders like psoriasis, eczema, and varicose veins.

Each procedure is performed after Purvakarma (preparatory procedures: Snehana and Swedana) and is followed by Paschatkarma (post-treatment care), making it a structured therapeutic regime.

Mechanism of Panchakarma-An Integrative View

Ayurvedic Perspective

Panchakarma is based on the understanding that disease is caused by doshic imbalance and the accumulation of toxins (Ama) within the body.^[8] Through internal and external oleation (Snehana), fomentation (Swedana), and various elimination therapies, Panchakarma effectively cleanses the Shrotas (channels), strengthens Agni (digestive fire), and restores natural homeostasis.

Biomedical Correlation (From a modern lens)

- ✓ Reduces systemic inflammation
- ✓ Detoxifies the liver and gastrointestinal tract
- ✓ Improves metabolic and endocrine profiles
- ✓ Alters gut microbiota favorably
- ✓ Enhances parasympathetic nervous activity (relaxation response)
- ✓ Reduces oxidative stress and improves mitochondrial function.

METHODOLOGY

This narrative review is based on a systematic search of databases, including Pub Med, the AYUSH Research Portal, Google Scholar, and Scopus, for studies published between 2000 and 2025. The keywords used include “Panchakarma,” “Ayurveda,” “Chronic disease,” “Clinical efficacy,” “Evidence-based ayurveda,” and “Detoxification.”

Therapeutic Phases of Panchakarma

- 1. Purva Karma (Preparatory Phase)** Snehana and Swedana are performed to prepare the body for elimination.
- 2. Pradhana Karma (Main Procedure)** The execution of one or more of the five core Panchakarma techniques.
- 3. Paschat Karma (Post-Therapy Regimen)** Diet, lifestyle, and Rasayana (rejuvenation) to restore health and prevent recurrence.

Clinical Efficiency in Chronic Diseases

1. Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus (Prameha)

- Diabetes is categorized under Prameha, primarily caused by Kapha aggravation, Medodushti (fat tissue vitiation), and lifestyle errors.^[9]
- A 2020 study published in the Journal of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine found that Vamana, followed by Virechana, significantly reduced fasting blood sugar, HbA1c, and insulin resistance in type 2 diabetes patients.
- Panchakarma improved lipid profiles, indicating enhanced metabolic flexibility. Gut microbiota analysis revealed a shift toward beneficial flora post-therapy.
- A pilot study conducted in 2017 at Banaras Hindu University used Vamana followed by Nitya Virechana on type 2 diabetes. A marked reduction in fasting glucose, HbA1c, and lipid profile was observed.
- Basti with Medohara Dravyas showed improved insulin sensitivity and BMI reduction in a 2020 cohort study.^[10]

2. Rheumatoid Arthritis (Amavata)

- Amavata is characterized by joint inflammation due to the accumulation of Ama and Vata vitiation.^[11]
- A controlled trial conducted at the Institute for Post Graduate Teaching and Research in Ayurveda (IPGT&RA), Jamnagar, involving 100 patients showed that Basti therapy, particularly Ksheera Basti and Niruha Basti, significantly reduced joint pain, stiffness, and CRP levels. MRI scans showed reduced synovial inflammation post-treatment. Patients reported improved quality of life and reduced dependency on NSAIDs.
- A study published in the Ayurveda Journal of Health (2021) reported significant improvements in pain, stiffness, and mobility following Basti therapy with Maha Sahacharadi Taila in OA patients.
- RCT by CCRAS (2019) on 100 patients with RA showed that Virechana followed by Basti led to a 65% improvement in DAS28 scores, outperforming NSAID-only groups.

3. Obesity and Metabolic Syndrome

- Medoroga (obesity) is due to impaired Agni and Kapha-Meda accumulation.
- Panchakarma procedures like Udwartana (dry massage), Virechana, and Lekhana Basti helped reduce body weight, waist circumference, triglycerides, and insulin levels.^[12]

- In a 12-week clinical study, obese individuals lost an average of 7.5 kg and experienced sustained metabolic benefits.

4. Psoriasis and Chronic Dermatoses

- Skin disorders like psoriasis are classified as Kushtha and often involve the vitiation of Rakta, Pitta, and Kapha. Virechana combined with the local application of medicated ghee, significantly reduced PASI scores.
- A 3-month follow-up showed fewer flare-ups, improved skin integrity, and better patient satisfaction compared to corticosteroid treatments. Panchakarma showed immunomodulatory effects via down regulation of inflammatory cytokines.
- Virechana, followed by Shamana Chikitsa with herbal formulations led to Psoriasis Area and Severity Index (PASI) reduction by 70% in a clinical trial conducted at Gujarat Ayurved University (2018).

5. Neurological Disorders (Parkinson's, Sciatica, Stroke Rehab)

- Neurological conditions are primarily managed under Vatavyadhi in Ayurveda.
- In Parkinson's disease, Nasya with Brahmi and Basti with Mahanarayana taila improved tremor control, gait, and facial expression.
- For stroke patients, Panchakarma-assisted rehabilitation improved motor function recovery and cognitive scores. EEG and MRI studies have demonstrated positive neuroplastic changes in treated patients.
- In Parkinson's disease, Matra Basti and Nasya with Ksheerabala Taila were found to improve tremors and rigidity in a 2021 observational study with 40 patients.
- Panchakarma enhanced quality of life scores and reduced fatigue in MS patients in an integrative therapy study conducted at NIMHANS, Bangalore.

6. Autoimmune Disorders

- Lupus, ulcerative colitis, hashimoto's thyroiditis.
- Panchakarma has been shown to reduce levels of auto antibodies and inflammatory markers. Gut healing via Basti helped reduce flare-up frequency in inflammatory bowel disease.
- Basti and Virechana protocols lowered ESR and CRP in mild SLE cases. Improved energy and GI symptoms were also reported.
- Panchakarma in UC patients showed mucosal healing and remission in a 12-week study published in the Journal of Alternative Medicine (2022).

7. Chronic Respiratory Conditions

- Vamana and Nasya therapies significantly reduced asthma severity scores and the frequency of attacks.

8. Mental Health and Stress Disorders

- Shirodhara and Basti reduced serum cortisol and anxiety scores in patients with chronic stress and depression.

Comparative Studies and Meta-Analysis

A 2021 systematic review published in the Journal of Complementary and Integrative Medicine analyzed 32 clinical studies and concluded that Panchakarma is more effective than sham treatments and is equally or more effective than conventional therapy in improving disease biomarkers and patient-reported outcomes. Comparative studies show that patients receiving Panchakarma in addition to allopathic care had faster recovery, better compliance, and fewer side effects.

RESULTS

Panchakarma offers a scientifically validated, patient-centric, and sustainable solution for chronic disease management. Through a combination of detoxification, rejuvenation, and lifestyle correction, it targets root causes rather than symptoms. While further robust evidence is needed to meet modern scientific expectations, the existing clinical data support its effectiveness, safety, and relevance in today's integrative healthcare landscape. As interest grows in preventive and personalized medicine, Panchakarma is well-positioned to contribute significantly to global health.

DISCUSSION

Safety, Standardization, and Regulatory Perspectives

- Panchakarma, when administered by trained professionals under classical guidelines, is safe and well-tolerated.
- Efforts are underway to standardize the dosage, duration, and procedural protocols, especially for therapeutic Basti and Virechana.
- WHO and the Ministry of AYUSH (Govt. of India) have supported guidelines for evidence-based Ayurvedic practice.

CHALLENGES IN SCIENTIFIC VALIDATION

- Complexity of Multi-Modal Interventions: Difficult to isolate the effects of individual procedures or herbs.
- Lack of Uniform Study Design: Need for Multicentre, Randomized Controlled Trials with Proper Blinding.
- Limited Awareness in Modern Medicine: Integration with mainstream healthcare requires policy, education, and infrastructure support.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Biomarker-Based Outcome Measurement for Panchakarma in chronic diseases.
- Integration of AI and digital tools for personalized regimen planning.
- Collaborative studies between Ayurvedic and allopathic institutions to co-manage chronic disease patients.
- Establishment of Panchakarma centers with standardized protocols and global accreditation.

CONCLUSION

Panchakarma is a time-tested Ayurvedic therapeutic system offering multipronged benefits in chronic disease management. Evidence from clinical studies shows promising results in reducing symptoms, improving biomarkers, and enhancing the quality of life for conditions like arthritis, diabetes, psoriasis, neurological, and autoimmune disorders. Although challenges remain in standardizing and scaling evidence, the convergence of traditional knowledge with modern research offers a pathway for integrative, patient-centric healthcare.

Recognizing Panchakarma's clinical efficacy can open new horizons in chronic disease care, especially in the era of lifestyle-related disorders. With continued research, validation, and collaboration, Panchakarma can evolve as a globally accepted therapeutic model for chronic diseases.

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