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Unani approach to health: The role of Dalk (Massage) and Riyazat (Exercise) in health promotion and disease management

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Abstract

Unani system of medicine is one among oldest medical systems that lays more emphasis on the prevention of diseases by establishing the normal equilibrium of various components and elements in our body. In this context, two significant regimens, namely, *Dalk* (massage) and *Riyazat* (exercise), are described for the maintenance of a healthy body in good rhythm.

Dalk is good for improving blood circulation, strengthening and toning the muscles, and it removes waste materials from the body. It also soothes the nervous system, thereby reducing stress and inducing a sense of calm. *Riyazat*, on the other hand, improves overall bodily functions by increasing metabolism, supporting healthy organ activity, and preventing the accumulation of harmful or imbalanced humours. Together, these practices not only maintain physical fitness but also support mental and emotional well-being.

Both *Dalk* and *Riyazat* have preventive as well as therapeutic benefits. They help enhance the body's immunity, reduce stress, and support recovery from various musculoskeletal and metabolic conditions. This review aims to explore how traditional Unani principles of *Dalk* and *Riyazat* can be integrated with modern scientific knowledge to create a more comprehensive and holistic approach to health promotion and disease management in today's clinical practice.

Keywords: *Dalk*, *Riyazat*, *Unani*, health, regimens, clinical practice

Introduction

One of the oldest medical systems in the world, *Unani* medicine sees health as a condition of harmonious balance among the body's internal forces, which is essentially controlled by the four humours (*Akhlat*) and preserved by the six essential principles (*Asbab-e-Sitta Zarooriya*). Disease occurs as a result of imbalance among the humours. To restore the equilibrium, *Unani* physicians use therapeutic approaches including Regimenal Therapies (*Ilaj-bil-Tadbeer*), which focuses on non-pharmacological interventions to fix the body's constitution, get rid of unhealthy materials (*Tanqiya-e-Mawad*), and restore the natural function. The two significant components of these regimens are *Dalk* (massage) and *Riyazat* (exercise), together representing a holistic approach to maintaining both physical and psychological health. While *Dalk* uses targeted manipulation of soft tissues to produce heat (*hararat*) and dissolve local waste (*tanqiya-e-mawad*), *Riyazat* includes deliberate, voluntary body motions intended to improve metabolism, eliminate waste from the body, and build physical conditioning. Their combined use prevents lifestyle-related disorders such as obesity, hypertension, and musculoskeletal ailments, aligning with the *Unani* principle of "prevention is better than cure" (*Hifz ma Taqaddum*).

Concept of Dalk (Massage)

Dalk is defined as a form of manual manipulation of the body involving rhythmic movements that stimulate circulation, eliminate waste products, and improve muscular tone. According to classical *Unani* texts such as *Al-Qanoon fi-al-Tibb* by Ibn Sina and *Kamil-us-Sana'ah* by Ali Ibn Abbas Majusi, *Dalk* serves both preventive (*Hifzan-e-Sehat*) and curative (*Ilaj-bil-Tadbeer*) purposes.

Regular *Dalk* improves peripheral blood flow, enhances lymphatic drainage, relieves muscular fatigue, and removes metabolic waste through perspiration.

It also contributes to mental relaxation by stimulating the nervous system. Modern research correlates these effects with improved blood circulation, muscle recovery, and stress reduction [1].

Dalk was classified as *Riyazat* (exercise) by *Unani* doctors because it can strengthen muscles, ligaments, and tendons, liquefy *Rutubat-e-badan*, liquefy *Akhlat-e-fasida* (morbid humours), and create *Lateef Hararat* (heat) in the body. This therapy uses hand massages to increase blood circulation throughout the body. Furthermore, it states that *Dalk* is a way to use hands or cloths, with or without oils, to exert pressure, rub against, vibrate against, or stimulate the body's delicate exterior. The American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) defines a massage as "push, hold, movement, and/or manual soft tissue manipulation of the body" [2-6].

Types of Dalk (Massage)

The Unani medical system recommends several massage techniques for a variety of diseases, depending on the patient's age, condition (healthy, fat, lean, or thin), season, *mizaj*, and the strength of the organ that has to be massaged. *Dalk* was divided into two groups by *Ibn-e-Sina* and *Ibn-e-Rushd*: *Dalk Baseet* and *Dalk Murakkab*. Furthermore, *Dalk Baseet* is separated into six categories according to *kaifiyat* (quality) and *kammiyat* (quantity).

Classification of dalk baseet

According to Kaifiyat (Quality)

- **Dalk-e-Sulb (Firm Massage):** Characterized by applying substantial pressure. It makes the body firm by dissolving the excessive amount of *Rutubat* from the body.
- **Dalk-e-Layyin (Gentle Massage):** This kind of massage is performed with hands gently and softly, without applying much pressure, ideal for inducing relaxation and stress alleviation.
- **Dalk-e-Mu'tadil (Moderate Massage):** Encompasses moderate pressure massage, striking a balance between *Sulab* and *Layyan*, conducive to general well-being maintenance.

According to Kammiyat (Quantity)

- **Dalk-e-Kathir (Prolonged Massage):** The lengthier time of this sort of massage helps to reduce body fat, by eliminating the excess amounts of *Rutubat* from the body.
- **Dalk-e-Qaleel (Short Massage):** This kind of massage is performed for a shorter period of time and merely causes the body to get heated and red. It makes the body parts shiny and produces heat in the body.
- **Dalk-e-Mu'tadil (Moderate Massage):** The duration of this massage occurs in between *Kaseer* and *Qaleel*. By promoting greater muscle perfusion, it improves muscular mass [7, 8].

Classification of Dalk Murakkab (Compound Massage)

- **Dalk-e-Sulb Kathir:** Hard massage for prolonged duration
- **Dalk-e-Sulb Qaleel:** Hard massage for shorter duration
- **Dalk-e-Sulb Mu'tadil:** Hard massage for moderate duration
- **Dalk-e-Layyin Kathir:** Smooth massage for prolonged

duration

- **Dalk-e-Layyin Qaleel:** Smooth massage for shorter duration
- **Dalk-e-Layyin Mu'tadil:** Smooth massage for moderate duration
- **Dalk-e-Mu'tadil Kathir:** Moderate massage for prolonged duration
- **Dalk-e-Mu'tadil Qaleel:** Moderate massage for shorter duration
- **Dalk-e-Mu'tadil Mu'tadil:** Moderate massage in both pressure and duration [3, 8].

Types of Dalk in classical Unani books

- **Dalk-e-Khashin (Rough Massage):** This massage is done with rough piece of cloth. The rapid blood flow to the surface causes *Madlukah* to become hyperemic. It shouldn't be done for a long time because doing so would make the body expel too much *Rutubat*, which could lead to dehydration.
- **Dalk-e-Amlas (Gentle Massage):** It is done with soft hands or soft piece of cloth. It gradually improves blood flow in the afflicted area, thus softens the body.
- **Dalk-e-Ist'idad (Preparatory Massage):** Before exercising, this type of massage is utilized as a warm-up to prepare the body for the numerous activities that will take place. In the beginning, the movements are smooth, and in the concluding moments, they are strong. It expels the waste products easily.
- **Dalk-e-Istirdad/Dalk-e-Musakkin (Soothing/Relaxing Massage):** After working out, this massage should be done lightly and moderately, especially if oil is being used. It is done to liquefy and eliminate the wastes products formed during exercise because holding onto them could lead to exhaustion [4, 8, 9].

Mechanism of action of Dalk (Massage)

The two main ideas of the Unani System of Medicine are the evacuation of morbid matter (*Tanqiya-e-Mawad-e-Fasida*) and the diversion of morbid humours (*Imala-e-Mawad-e-Raddiya*). *Tanqiya-e-Mawad* is the process that resolves and eliminates excess humours and diseased fluids from the body while maintaining the qualitative and quantitative balance of bodily humours, which is essential for maintaining good health. *Imala-e-Mawad* involves rerouting the harmful fluids and humours from the injured organs to a location where they may be swiftly removed from the human tissues. Additionally, massage therapy increases blood flow, produces analgesia, and induces sedation [3, 9, 10].

Objectives of Massage

Ibne Sina has mentioned the purpose of different types of *dalk*, these are:

- To improve blood circulation of the particular organ.
- To eliminate the *madda-e-fasida* (morbid matter) from the body.
- For *imalah* (to divert the matter from one organ to another).
- To remove the *barid mizaj* (cold temperament).
- To make the body firm, if it is loose and flabby; to soften it, if the body is hard.
- For dissolution of *riyah* (morbid gases) from the body.
- Massage is done by using oil with an aim to retain the

rutubat (fluid) of organ.

- To relieve pain.
- To correct the inefficiency of specific muscles or muscle groups and to regain normal range of joint movement to achieve efficient functional movement.
- To encourage the patient to use the ability which has regained in the performance of normal functional activities so accelerates the rehabilitation [8, 11].

Therapeutic uses of Dalk

- **Treatment of Musculoskeletal Conditions:** *Dalk* is widely used to treat musculoskeletal conditions like lumbago, arthritis, and arthralgia. Customized massage methods that target injured muscles, joints, and connective tissues reduce inflammation, ease pain, and improve function and mobility.
- **Treatment of Neurological Conditions:** *Dalk* has a therapeutic role in the management of a variety of neurological conditions, such as sciatica and facial palsy (Bell's palsy). By improving circulation, reducing muscle spasms, and restoring neurological function, massage treatments applied to afflicted areas reduce symptoms and promote functional recovery. For the treatment of *suda* (headache), apply *Roghan-e-Banafsha* to the soles in *Suda-e-Haar*, and massage the scalp for a few minutes with lukewarm oils in *Suda-e-Baarid*. In case of *Sarsaam* (Meningitis), use a mixture of vinegar, milk, and *Roghan-e-Banafsha* to massage the scalp [12].
- **Management of Zeequnafas (Asthma):** *Roghan Naardeen*, *Roghan suddab*, and hot temperament oils can be used to massage the lateral portions of the thorax in order to relieve asthma symptoms if the cause is *yabusat* (dryness) [13].
- **Relief from Psychological Disorders like Depression and Anxiety:** *Dalk* has positive impacts on psychological health and provides relief from disorders like depression, stress, and anxiety. *Dalk* strengthens mental health and emotional balance by promoting relaxation, releasing tension, and elevating mood through its calming and soothing qualities [14].

Treating various forms of pain

It is recommended to give the afflicted area of the body a gentle massage for an extended period.

Pain from *Ghalba-e-Burudat* (Excessive Cold), apply a mixture of *Dhatura* oil and *Roghan-e-Nargis/Roghan-e-Sosan* to the afflicted area.

Pain from *Ghalba-e-Haraarat* (Excessive Heat) is relieved by massaging the affected area by *Roghan-e-Hina*.

Waja-ul-Asab (Neurologic Pain) is relieved by a Turkish bath, local massages with *Roghan-e-Sosan*, *Roghan-e-Nargis*, and *Roghan-e-Gaar* [15].

Preventive aspect of Dalk

- **Increasing Children's Immunity and Strength:** *Dalk* is recommended as a prophylactic to strengthen immunity and support the body's defences in kids. Using gentle massage techniques improves circulation, lymphatic drainage, and general well-being, which strengthens the immune system, especially when you get up in the morning [13, 14].

- **Preparation for exercise and maintenance of physical health in adults:** *Dalk* serves as a prelude to physical activity or exercise in adults. By relaxing muscles, increasing flexibility, and reducing tension, massage techniques combined with the right oils to reduce the risk of injury during physical activity and improve general physical health.
- **Support during Pregnancy and Labor:** *Dalk* is a beneficial therapy for expectant mothers during both pregnancy and labour. The dorsal, abdominal, and pelvic areas are massaged delicately to relieve pain, promote relaxation, and aid with the body's natural parturition processes.

Contraindications of Dalk

- **General contraindications:** High fever, severe renal or cardiac diseases, osteoporosis, severe spasticity, very hairy skin.
- **Local contraindications:** Acute inflammation, skin diseases, recent fractures, severe varicose veins, atherosclerosis, thrombosis, malignancy, myositis ossificans, open wound [16].

Concept of Riyazat (Exercise)

Riyazat, a common *Ilaj-bil-Tadbeer* regimen that enhances and sustains physical fitness and advances an individual's overall health and well-being, is a sequence of voluntary movements that results in quick, deep breathing. It helps prevent several illnesses in addition to promoting excellent health. Voluntary movements are used in *riyazat* (exercise) to remove waste products from a sick person's body (*Tanqiya-e-Mawad*).

The renowned Unani physician Avicenna, in his book "The Canon of Medicine," states that a moderate amount of exercise, when conducted routinely, is an effective prophylactic against all temperamental and behavioral disturbances, provided that the other essential components of health are also considered [17].

Varieties of Riyazat

Riyazat is mainly of two kinds:

- ***Riyazate Haqeeqi or Kulli*** refers to complete exercise, such as horse riding.
- ***Riyazate Juziyya*** refers to partial exercise, such as lifting stones [18].

Another classification of Riyazat

- ***Riyazat-e-Arzhah*:** Exercise that is not purposive; it is implemented during routine occupational tasks, such as those of ironsmiths and washermen.
- ***Riyazat-e-Khalisah*:** Exercise that is intentionally performed for the purpose of achieving its intended benefits.

Furthermore, *Riyazat-e-Khalisah* presents variations in terms of its mode, intensity, and duration. Therefore, it may be labeled as *Qaseer* (short) or *Taveel* (long), *Layyin* (mild) or *Sulb* (strenuous), *Bati* (slow) or *Sari'* (rapid).

Further classifications of Riyazat-e-Khalisah According to duration

- *Riyazat qaleela*-Short duration exercise
- *Riyazat kaseera*-Long duration exercise

- *Riyazat moatadil*-Moderate duration exercise

According to strength

- *Riyazat qawiya/shadeeda*-forceful exercise
- *Riyazat zaeefa*/mild exercise-in which less force is used
- *Riyazat moatadil*-average strenuous exercise in which average force is used

According to sura't

- *Riyazat sariya*-the exercise in which movements should be rapid and fast)
- *Riyazat batiya*-exercise in which movements should be dull and delay
- *Riyazat moatadil*-movements in between riyazat sariya and batiya ^[19].

How Riyazat works

- *Riyazat*, from the very beginning, activates the intrinsic heat and induces a sensation of lightness in the body through the generation of moderate warmth.
- It inhibits the accumulation of toxic waste by:
 - Dispersing.
 - Facilitating the movement of waste material through the excretory ducts.
 - Diverting it towards outlets.
- *Riyazat* enhances the body's intrinsic heat, strengthens muscles and joints, and enhances their resilience to injury and illness.
- By removing waste, it enhances tissue absorption of nutrients, enlarges and softens organs, liquefies secretions, and dilates pores.

Objectives of Riyazat

- The aim of *Riyazat* is to enhance *Istehala* (metabolism) for the body's optimal functioning.
- To maintain or enhance the body's flexibility
- To eliminate toxic substances from the body
- To keep the body's musculoskeletal system coordinated and balanced.

Hidayat-E-Riyazat (Recommendations of Exercise)

- Exercise should be tailored to the individual's age, temperament, occupation, physical condition, and availability of leisure.
- The optimal time to engage in physical activity is when the body is in a moderate state.⁸
- Before beginning any kind of physical exercise, it is essential to perform a thorough cleansing of the intestines and the urinary bladder ^[8].
- It should be performed after completing dietary digestion ^[20].
- It is recommended to consume a light diet (*Ghiza-e-Lateef*) during periods of intense exercise, particularly during the summer, while a substantial diet (*Ghiza-e-Kaseef*) should be consumed during the winter ^[21].
- The exercise session should be preferably conducted in the morning.
- Avoiding exercise on an empty or full stomach is highly recommended ^[22].
- Exercise should not be performed if the body is overrun with *Hararat* (hotness),
- *Yubusat* (dryness), and *Burudat* (coolness) ^[22].

Benefits of Riyazat (Exercise)

- Moderate and frequent exercise is beneficial for maintaining health and reducing the risk of diseases.
- *Riyazat* prevents the buildup of harmful substances in the body and facilitates the dissolution (*tahleel-e-mawad*) of detrimental stuff, expelling it from the system.⁸
- *Hararat-e-Gharizia* (innate heat) can be stimulated with appropriate activity ^[20].
- Exercise prepares the body to assimilate nutrients ^[23].
- It imparts a sensation of lightness throughout the body.
- It safeguards the body against both *maddi* (tangible) and *ghair maddi* (intangible) ailments.
- During physical exertion, the body's pores open.
- It strengthens the ligaments, cartilage, nerves, and joints.
- It facilitates the elimination of waste materials via natural pathways.
- Exercise enhances the *Quwat-e-Dafia* (evacuative faculty) and *Quwat-e-Hazma*
- (digestive faculty) ^[19].

Exercise of specific organs

Unani physicians provided explanations of traditional recommendations concerning particular exercises for specific organs of the body.

Chest and respiratory system exercises (*Aza-e-Tanaffus*)

It involves activities such as lifting heavy objects, speech, and phonetics. Intermittent cessation of respiration is accompanied by prolonged loud vocalizations ^[21].

Auditory exercise

The exercise involves listening to melodious music and sound ^[23].

Eye exercises

One should observe the beautiful landscapes and maintain attention to minor details. Gradually and measuredly observing luminous objects allows the person to unlock their vibrant hues, particularly the soothing shades of yellow, green, and sky blue that evoke feelings of tranquillity. Taking time to travel while seated in the opposite direction encourages a fresh perspective of environment, inviting to explore it from various angles. This mindful practice enhances one's visual experiences and serves as a form of *Riyazat* a regimen that promotes health preservation through intentional awareness. Ultimately, by embracing these observations, the person cultivates a richer understanding of both the world around him and others ^[22].

Riyazat as a regimen for health preservation

Sheikh Ibne Sina identifies three fundamental components for health preservation: exercise, diet, and sleep. Exercise is a significant non-pharmacological therapeutic regimen.

Exercise exerts an anti-inflammatory effect on the body

A specific group of cytokines is produced as a result of muscle contraction during exercise. IL-6 is a cytokine that initially facilitates inflammation, serving as a critical early response of the immune system to infection, but is subsequently accompanied by a rise in anti-inflammatory cytokines. Disabling the inflammation phase is equally as

crucial as activating it; failure to do so may result in tissue and organ damage.

Improves oxygen availability in the bloodstream

Immune function is compromised under conditions of inadequate oxygen, such as high altitude, reduced respiration, or hypoxia. Moderate exercise enhances oxygen transport in the bloodstream, potentially augmenting the body's resistance.

Facilitate the movement of lymph, immune cells, and antibodies

Help the lymph, immune cells, and antibodies move: Gentle exercises, moving your body regularly, muscle contractions, and techniques like massage are important to encourage lymph flow through the lymphatic vessels. Deep breathing combined with stretching exercises, such as yoga or tai chi, effectively promotes lymph circulation.

The role of Riyazat in disease management

Riyazat serves multiple purposes, including weight loss, physical fitness, muscle building, and recreational enjoyment. It contributes to the prevention of lifestyle-related disorders, including type 2 diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and hypertension. *Riyazat* functions as an anti-anxiety, anti-insomnia, and anti-depressant intervention, while also contributing to maintaining self-esteem.

Exercise is essential in the management of obesity

Obesity is defined by a body mass index (BMI) exceeding 30 kg/m², calculated by dividing an individual's weight by the square of their height (WHO, 2000). The range of 25-30 kg/m² is classified as overweight. Reducing caloric intake aids in weight loss, however, maintaining weight loss necessitates the integration of a calorie-controlled diet with consistent physical activity, such as brisk walking, jogging, swimming, tennis, or utilizing a step-trainer at the gym.

Therapeutic exercise in diabetes management

Exercise typically reduces blood glucose levels. Low or normal blood glucose levels may lead to hypoglycemia during exercise, as active muscles utilize glucose. Consequently, adjustments to food intake and insulin dosages are necessary, contingent upon the intensity and duration of the expected exercise [24].

Exercises for alleviating back pain

Back pain episodes can be classified as acute, subacute, or chronic based on their duration. The pain can be described as a dull ache, shooting or piercing sensation, or a burning feeling, potentially radiating to the arms, hands, legs, or feet. It may also manifest as tingling, weakness, or numbness in the limbs. The lower back, or lumbar region, is the most prevalent site of pain. The pain may stem from muscles, nerves, bones, joints, or other anatomical structures. Exercises may effectively alleviate pain; however, they should be conducted under the supervision of a licensed health professional. A study indicated that exercise is beneficial for chronic back pain but not for acute pain [25].

Physical activities for improving sleep and addressing insomnia

Exercise enhances sleep quality by facilitating a more

seamless and consistent transition between sleep cycles and phases. Individuals who consistently participate in physical activity experience a reduced frequency of sleeplessness episodes. Engaging in moderate exercise for 20 to 30 minutes three to four times weekly can enhance sleep quality.

Physical activity for individuals with Parkinson's disease

Exercise may enhance mobility in individuals affected by Parkinson's disease due to its impact on movement. Engaging in walking, jogging, stretching, swimming, and similar activities can effectively assist in managing the tremors, muscle stiffness, and reduced mobility associated with Parkinson's disease. A daily exercise routine may enhance self-perception, support ongoing functionality, aid in maintaining a healthy body weight, and improve sleep quality. Consult your physician prior to initiating any exercise regimen.

Exercise in hemiplegia

Greek and Arab physicians such as Hippocrates, Galen, Rhazes, and Avicenna have noted the use of exercise and massage with medicated oil to mitigate disability in hemiplegic patients. Rhazes and *Ali bin Abbas Majoosi* noted the application of *Roghane Qust* on paralyzed areas and vertebrae [19, 26].

Conclusion

The *Unani* health paradigm is founded on the principle of sustaining equilibrium among the body's humours, temperament, and inherent faculties. *Dalk* and *Riyazat* serve as two of the most effective and accessible methods for attaining this balance. Regular massage and tailored exercise optimize physiological processes, strengthen the nervous and circulatory systems, and reduce the risk of chronic disease. These regimens restore physical vitality and contribute to mental calmness and emotional stability, aligning with the *Unani* concept of harmony between body and mind. The integration of classical *Unani* practices with contemporary preventive medicine presents a sustainable, non-invasive, and holistic approach to addressing lifestyle-related health issues and promoting longevity.

Conflict of Interest

Not available

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