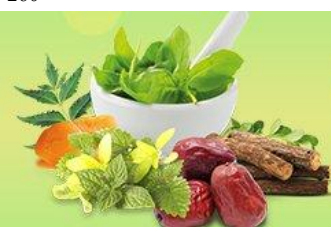


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## Dalak (massage) in Unani system of medicine: Historical roots, therapeutic applications, and contemporary relevance

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### Abstract

Dalak (massage) is one of the most significant regimental therapies (*Ilaj-bil-Tadbeer*) in the Unani system of medicine. Rooted in Greco-Arab tradition and practiced across ancient civilizations, Dalak has been employed both as a preventive and therapeutic measure. Classical Unani physicians such as Hippocrates, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd emphasized its role in eliminating morbid humors, enhancing circulation, relieving pain, and strengthening the body. Dalak is categorized into various types based on technique, pressure, and duration, with specific physiological and clinical benefits. Recent scientific studies validate its efficacy in musculoskeletal, neurological, and psychosomatic conditions. This review synthesizes classical concepts with modern evidence, highlighting the potential of Dalak as an integrative and cost-effective therapeutic modality in contemporary healthcare.

**Keywords:** Dalak, massage, Unani medicine, *Ilaj-bil-Tadbeer*, neurological disorders, musculoskeletal disorders

### Introduction

The Unani system of medicine, with origins in Greece and later enriched by Arab and Persian scholars, represents one of the world's oldest traditional medical systems still practiced today. Among its therapeutic modalities, *Ilaj-bil-Tadbeer* (regimental therapy) includes a range of non-pharmacological interventions such as cupping, venesection, hammam (bath), exercise, and massage (Dalak). Dalak is particularly noteworthy for its dual preventive and curative functions, having been employed across diverse conditions since antiquity <sup>[1, 2]</sup>.

Massage as a healing art was known in China (2700 BCE), Egypt, and Greece, where Hippocrates described “anatripsis” (rubbing) as a cornerstone of medical treatment. In Unani medicine, this practice was systematically elaborated as Dalak, aimed at balancing humors, restoring temperament (*mizaj*), and maintaining general health <sup>[3, 4]</sup>.

### Concept of Dalak in Unani Medicine

Dalak is defined as manipulation of the body surface through rubbing, kneading, tapping, or pressing, performed with hands, cloth, or oils. Its objectives include: generating heat (*hararat*) to liquefy thick humors, strengthening muscles and ligaments, restoring humoral balance, and relieving stiffness and fatigue <sup>[5, 6]</sup>.

Ibn Rushd classified Dalak as a type of exercise that aids in the removal of waste metabolites, while Ibn Sina emphasized its role in regulating circulation and balancing temperament <sup>[7, 8]</sup>.

### Mechanism of Action

Unani physicians explained Dalak's effects through two fundamental principles:

1. **Tanqiya-e-Mawad:** Elimination of morbid humors and excess fluids.
2. **Imala-e-Mawad:** Diversion of morbid materials from diseased sites to organs of elimination <sup>[6, 9]</sup>.

Modern physiology complements this understanding by demonstrating massage's role in enhancing venous return, stimulating lymphatic drainage, reducing sympathetic overactivity, and modulating pain pathways <sup>[10, 11]</sup>.

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Classification of Dalak

Dalak is broadly classified as:

- **Dalak Baseet (Simple Massage):** hard (*Sulb*), gentle (*Layyan*), moderate (*Moatadil*), prolonged (*Kaseer*), short (*Qaleel*).
- **Dalak Murakkab (Compound Massage):** combinations such as *Sulb Kaseer* or *Layyan Qaleel*.

**Special Types:** *Khashin* (rough, with cloth), *Amlas* (smooth, circulation enhancing), *Istedad* (preparatory,

before exercise), *Isterdad/Musakkin* (restorative, after exercise) Timing and Duration  
Classical texts emphasize that massage should ideally be done in the morning; in summer before sunrise, in winter afternoon, and in spring/autumn at noon. It should not be performed immediately after meals or on an empty stomach. Duration varies by condition: 15-20 minutes in weak patients, 30-40 minutes for relaxation, and up to 1 hour in elderly [6, 7].

Table 1: The fundamental difference lies in their conceptual framework

Feature	Dalak (Unani Massage)	Modern Massage Therapy (e.g., Swedish, Deep Tissue)
Philosophical Root	Unani Medicine (Greco-Arab system), focusing on the balance of the four humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile) and temperaments ( <i>Mizaj</i> ).	Rooted in Western anatomy, physiology, and the biomedical model.
Primary Goal	Holistic health maintenance, evacuation of morbid matter ( <i>Tanqiya-e-Mawad</i> ), diversion of humours ( <i>Imala-e-Mawad</i> ), strengthening ligaments/muscles, and balancing temperament.	Symptom relief (pain, tension), improved circulation, increased range of motion, and stress reduction.
Application	Often involves the application of specific medicated oils ( <i>Roghan</i> ) or substances, prescribed based on the patient's temperament and disease.	May use non-medicated oils, lotions, or no medium, with techniques standardized for muscle and soft tissue manipulation.

Physiological and Therapeutic Benefits

Dalak exerts systemic benefits, including:

- **Musculoskeletal:** relief from stiffness, spasms, arthritis, backache.
- **Neurological:** improves paralysis, tremors, sciatica, epilepsy.
- **Psychological:** reduces stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia.
- **Circulatory/Respiratory:** enhances blood and lymphatic flow, assists pulmonary clearance.
- **Digestive/Urinary:** improves metabolism and excretion [7, 10, 13].

Clinical Applications

Dalak is indicated both for prevention and therapy:

- **Preventive:** enhances growth in children, strengthens elderly, prepares athletes, supports pregnancy.
- **Therapeutic:** effective in musculoskeletal disorders (arthritis, cervical spondylosis, frozen shoulder), neurological conditions (stroke rehabilitation, dementia, sciatica), psychosomatic disorders (melancholia, insomnia), and gynecological conditions [6, 7, 12].

Contraindications include acute infections, septicemia, acute arthritis, skin ulcers, and phlebitis.

Contemporary Scientific Evidence

Modern clinical studies support Dalak’s efficacy in several conditions:

- Massage reduces chronic low back pain and improves function [14, 15].
- Effective in osteoarthritis and stroke rehabilitation [16].
- Improves mobility, reduces pain, enhances quality of life [17].

Nonetheless, further well-designed randomized controlled trials are warranted to validate classical claims through modern biomedical parameters.

Conclusion

Dalak, an ancient art deeply rooted in the Unani system of

medicine, remains a cornerstone of *Ilaj-bil-Tadbeer* (regimental therapy). Its systematic classification, specific techniques, and principle-based application, focused on the holistic restoration of humoral balance and temperament, differentiate it from contemporary massage modalities. The dual preventive and therapeutic roles of Dalak, supported by both classical wisdom and a growing body of contemporary scientific research, establish it as a valuable adjunct in integrative healthcare. Specific clinical trials have demonstrated its potential in managing musculoskeletal, neurological, and psychosomatic disorders, often enhanced by the synergistic effect of medicated oils. With increasing global interest in non-pharmacological and cost-effective therapies, Dalak is positioned to offer a safe, holistic, and efficacious approach to health and well-being. Future research efforts must focus on the standardization of Dalak techniques, dosimetry, and rigorous evidence-based validation of specific Unani claims through well-designed randomized controlled trials to achieve broader acceptance and integration into mainstream medical practice

Conflict of Interest

Not available.

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