

# Ayurveda and Arthritis A Case for Integrative Rheumatology

The newly-opened Ayurvedic centre in Lucknow dedicated to arthritis is a landmark as it solders India's ancient medical wisdom with comprehensive and advanced practices to offer cure for an affliction affecting nearly 180 million Indians

**Editor's Note:** *The Arthritis Treatment and Advanced Research Centre at the State Ayurvedic College and Hospital, Lucknow, that started functioning this year, is not just the first Ayurvedic centre to be dedicated to a specific medical condition, it also underscores the efficacy of alternative medicine systems in providing solutions not yet fully addressed by modern medicine. On our request, the founder-in-charge of the centre, Dr Sanjeev Rastogi — also an eminent contributor to Science India on Ayurveda and traditional medicines — who conceptualised this project in 2018, shares the philosophy behind the centre and its role in providing medical care to an overwhelming number of afflicted Indians.*



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■ Dr Sanjeev Rastogi

India is witnessing an arthritis epidemic currently. Referring to the painful conditions related to joints or adjoining structures, arthritis affects over 180 million people in India. Over 30% Indians suffer from some kind of pain related to joints at least once in their lifetime. Osteoarthritis, a disease predominantly affecting knee joints, alone cripples over 83 million in India, cutting a mammoth share of over 6% of the Indian population.

Recent decades have been phenomenal in terms of the progress made in the field of rheumatology, a science dedicated to the study of joint and connective tissue-related pathologies — hats off to the new generation disease modifying anti-rheumatic drugs and new age bio-

Image Courtesy: Dr Sanjeev Rastogi

logicals clubbed with newer molecular diagnostic techniques capable of identifying and treating such diseases with relative ease and quickness. Added with success of joint replacement surgeries, the entire scenario of suffering due to arthritis has changed substantially. This is largely agreed now that instead of pain management in joint diseases, as has been done conventionally, an early and systematic approach to avert or halt the pathogenesis is the key to prevent joint destruction. This is the reason that hand deformities, a common consequence of rheumatoid arthritis, or bowlegs, typical of knee osteoarthritis, are appearing less frequently now in rheumatology clinics.

### ARTHRITIS AND AYURVEDA

However, despite technological advances of modern rheumatology, an increasing number of people suffering from joint diseases are visiting Ayurveda outpatient clinics across the country.

As per rough estimates, approximately 70% of all who suffer from joint diseases visit alternative health facilities at least once during their illness, of which a large proportion goes to Ayurveda. There have been critical explanations for this; initially, it was considered a health care-seeking behaviour of patients to whom easy cures are not available. A thorough look into Ayurveda arthritis clinics, however, proves otherwise. People suffering from

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a variety of joint diseases are reported to have benefitted from Ayurveda without additional exposures to drug-related adversities and toxicities.

Among all arthritics who visit Ayurveda clinics, over two-thirds have already visited allopathy clinics. Among various reasons for choosing Ayurveda, the most prominent ones are related to cost, adversities and inadequate responses by modern medicine. To the surprise of many, Ayurveda is doing much better on these counts for those who preferred it after an initial exposure to conventional therapy.

### WHY IS AYURVEDA'S EFFICACY NOT YET KNOWN?

Another surprise is the fact that despite a large number of arthritis patients visiting Ayurveda clinics, why has the efficacy of Ayurveda in rheumatology not yet become a pervasive phenomenon? Answering this question will require an honest introspection into Ayurvedic way of clinical practice, its overall take on scientific research as a method to move

further and its over-reliance upon its limited traditional sources of knowledge.

To address this lacuna, the novel Arthritis Treatment and Advanced Research Centre, which started functioning at the State Ayurvedic College and Hospital, Lucknow, earlier this year, was conceptualised in 2018. Though it was delayed due to COVID-19 pandemic, it hopes to comprehensively utilise every component of management related to Ayurveda rheumatology under one roof under the guidance of an Ayurvedic rheumatologist. Supported by the Uttar Pradesh government, it also hopes to prepare future Ayurveda rheumatologists to take up the charge of fitting themselves into mainstream rheumatology

Spread in an area of about 3000 sq ft on the first floor of the State Ayurvedic College and Hospital, it boasts of an OP, treatment, waiting, pharmacy and nursing sections. Currently, the centre is providing OP-based services to approximately 300 patients monthly on alternate days of the week. The centre also provides day care treatment facility to patients to acquaint them with the treatments that they can subsequently carry out at home. The patients visiting the centre hail from various distant places of Uttar Pradesh. The centre, led by a senior Ayurvedic rheumatologist who is assisted by four trainee Ayurvedic rheumatologists, has its own team of paramedical staff to assist the OP consultation and treatment process. In future, the centre aims to open its IP services for all those who require monitored care.

It's regrettable that the potential of Ayurveda in general clinical practice, and specifically in rheumatology, has not been utilised across the country with only limited practitioners providing extensive clinical expertise developed through perseverance. Ayurvedic clinical practice in general suffers from inadequacy of experimentations to generate new observations and it overtly relies upon 'individualisation' syndrome which recommends the practice of precision medicine in principle but is sub-optimally understood and explored.

Because of these limitations,

Patients at the Arthritis Treatment and Advanced Research Centre at the State Ayurvedic College and Hospital, Lucknow



Image Courtesy: Dr. Sanjeev Rastogi



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Ayurvedic general practice could not move beyond a certain range of therapeutic benefits or be tapped to its fullest potential.

### **SPECIALITY ARTHRITIS CENTRE: THE GENESIS**

For understanding the need of optimising the therapeutic benefits of Ayurveda interventions in individual cases and expanding its benefits to a larger population, it was essential to focus on speciality clinical practice whereby new knowledge accumulated through experience, experiment and observations could help develop a goal-oriented therapeutic plan in specific clinical areas.

Putting the idea of developing the Arthritis Treatment and Advanced Research Centre in Ayurveda was the culmination of this urge to optimise and expand the benefits of Ayurveda to a large population. Moreover, this was also the realisation that the future of Ayurveda cannot simply rest upon the knowledge available today as much is still needed to be learned to meet the expectations of patients. Learning from the mistakes of others is also crucial. A

health care system offering interventions in clinical settings should be sensitive to patient-centric considerations and should be able to address them to the extent possible.

The Arthritis Treatment and Advanced Research Centre nurtured informally, took three years to materialise, impeded as it was by the COVID-19 pandemic — the period was crucially rich in experience, successes and failures. As a forerunner to the actual centre, a Gathiya Clinic was run on

**As a forerunner, a Gathiya Clinic was run on pilot basis, where over 2500 patients with joint diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, spondylo-arthropathy, gouty arthritis, low back ache and undifferentiated arthritis, were registered**

pilot basis to explore the feasibility of a dedicated Ayurvedic centre for arthritis. Over 2500 patients with various joint diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, spondylo-arthropathy, gouty arthritis, low back ache and undifferentiated arthritis, were registered at Gathiya Clinic during this period. An overall 60-70 % improvement on the basis of the patient's global assessment was observed among those who had completed at least six months of recommended Ayurvedic treatment. These observations were highly encouraging and were published in Journal of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine, an international journal. During the pandemic, especially during the lockdown period, the clinic offered Ayurveda consultation through WhatsApp video calling to patients for uninterrupted follow-ups online. This was a novel experiment in Ayurveda and was subsequently adopted by others in the country.

A complete closure of health care facilities for non-COVID patients during the countrywide lockdown brought forward some highly valuable observations. For instance, it was observed that in the

absence of regular follow-ups and revised treatment recommendations, many beneficiaries of Gathiya Clinic continued with the last prescription given to them before the onset of lockdown. A few managed the shortage of drugs due to non-opening of Ayurvedic drug stores smartly, by reducing the drug dose or frequency. It was a great revelation that most of such patients who continued their last prescribed Ayurveda medicines despite its suboptimal daily dose, observed no flair-ups in terms of their joint related symptoms. This observation was suggestive of an important arthritis management clue from the perspective of Ayurveda, indicating that possibly the joint related pathologies can be kept under control with a minimum maintenance once past the active disease stage.

Observations made during the past three years paved the way for a well-thought out strategy to introduce Ayurveda as a serious player in rheumatology care. While remaining aware of the limitations of Ayurveda and Allopathic system in joint care, the idea behind the centre was to see clearly, how and how much Ayurveda could benefit such cases on first hand, and to see if there were additional benefits in adopting an integrative strategy by employing both Ayurveda and modern medicine together in the same patient for optimised benefits.

### RAMPING UP AYURVEDIC CLINICAL PRACTICE

Ayurvedic clinical practice in general is also found limited in its exploration with various key components of patient care. For example, *ahara* (daily intake of food) and *vihara* (daily routine) form two essential components of the trio of *aushadhi* (medicine). Unfortunately, current clinical practice of Ayurveda takes a large recourse upon drug component and keeps the other two minimally explored, obviously leaving much to be done to manage a disease. It cannot be over-emphasised that in many joint conditions, food quality, quantity and intake methods play a crucial role from Ayurvedic perspective and hence



**Above and right: Dr Rastogi with patients at the Arthritis Treatment and Advanced Research Centre at the State Ayurvedic College and Hospital, Lucknow**

are essential to be addressed to obtain a cure. Daily routine again is crucial in the initiation of joint-related pathologies and so its correction seems critically important.

Similarly, *vyadhipratyanik chikitsa* (treatment strategy focusing upon disease as a composite entity) has taken the main course in Ayurveda and more classical *dosha pratyaynika chikitsa* (strategy of looking at disease causing factors and interventions to minimise their impact) has taken a backseat. It is important to note that while the former provides ease of prescribing with the advantage of quick and tangible outcomes, the latter addresses the disease-causing factors and therefore, slow in action with less tangible impact; yet it cannot be overlooked as it has the potential to eradicate disease.

*Panchakarma* (five-fold bio-purificatory treatments) has been dependably employed in Ayurvedic rheumatology practice. Though the preparatory phase (*purvakarma*) of these modalities — *snehana* (oil application) and *svedana* (heat application) — has been of much interest to Ayurveda practitioners, much remains to be done to standardise these applications, identify their indications and predict the deliverables in



Images Courtesy: Dr Sanjeev Rastogi

terms of time invested.

Lucknow's novel Arthritis Treatment and Advanced Research Centre is all set to fly high and serve the people suffering from joint diseases with time-tested yet novel strategies of Ayurveda. We see this as a shot in the arm for rheumatology, and an ultimate in integrative rheumatology.

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