

THE SCIENCE OF BREATH: PRANAYAMA AND ITS AYURVEDIC ROLE IN CARDIOVASCULAR AND RESPIRATORY HARMONY

Dr. Himani Rot^{*1}, Dr. Brahmanand Sharma², Dr. Gajendra Kumar Dubey³, Dr. Ashok
Kumar Sen⁴

^{1,4}M.D. Scholar, Department of Swasthavritta, PGIA, Jodhpur.

²H.O.D., Department of Swasthavritta, PGIA, Jodhpur.

³Associate Professor, Department of Swasthavritta, PGIA, Jodhpur.

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*Corresponding Author: Dr. Himani Rot

M.D. Scholar, Department of Swasthavritta, PGIA, Jodhpur.

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ABSTRACT

Pranayama, a key component of Yoga, is an ancient method that emphasizes conscious breath management to balance the mind, body, and spirit. In Ayurveda, breath (Prana) is considered the essential life force that sustains physiological functions. Contemporary research is progressively supporting the efficacy of pranayama in improving cardiovascular and respiratory function by improving autonomic regulation, oxygenation, and stress resilience. This article investigates the physiological, psychological, and Ayurvedic foundations of pranayama in the promotion of cardiovascular and respiratory health, drawing on both historical Ayurvedic sources and recent scientific results.

KEYWORDS: Pranayama, Yoga breathing techniques, Ayurveda and pranayama, Cardiovascular health, Respiratory health, Science of breath, Ayurvedic physiology.

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, an ancient Indian school of holistic medicine, identifies Prana as the vital energy that governs life processes. Maharshi Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga mentions Pranayama as the fourth limb (Anga) following Asana. The practice regulates inhaling (Puraka), exhalation (Rechaka), and retention (Kumbhaka), resulting in mental stability and purification of the body's channels (Nāḍī-sūddhi).^[1]

Pranayama, through its regulatory influence on the autonomic nervous system and energy channels, provides a natural and preventive approach to maintaining optimal cardiorespiratory health. Cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, which are frequently linked to stress, sedentary lifestyle, and poor respiratory habits, are the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide.^[2]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review is based on historical Ayurvedic writings such as Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Hatha Yoga Pradipika, as well as contemporary scientific studies examining the physiological effects of pranayama on the circulatory and pulmonary systems. Evidence-based studies were collected between 2000 and 2024 using research sources such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and the AYUSH Portal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Ayurvedic Understanding of Pranayama and Prana

Identifies Prana as one of the five vital airs that regulate respiration, heart function, and mental clarity. Disturbances in Prana Vāta are associated with breathlessness (Shvāsa), palpitations (Hṛidroga), and mental instability. Pranayama regulates Prāṇa Vāta, balancing Doshas and promoting lung and heart function.

Pranayama operates on both the physical and subtle energy levels. According to the theory, controlling the breath leads to controlling the mind, which subsequently harmonizes all physiological activity.

2. Physiological Effects on the Respiratory System.^[3]

Regular pranayama practice enhances

- **Lung Capacity and Ventilation:** Techniques such as Anuloma Viloma and Bhastrika boost tidal volume, vital capacity, and maximum voluntary ventilation
- Deep breathing improves gas exchange efficiency by increasing alveolar ventilation and oxygen diffusion.
- Kapala Bhati improves respiratory muscle strength, specifically the diaphragm and intercostal muscles.
- **Reduction in Respiratory Disorders:** Controlled breathing lowers the frequency and severity of asthma and COPD episodes by enhancing airway clearance and decreasing bronchial hyperreactivity.

A study by Joshi et al. (2001) demonstrated that subjects practicing pranayama for 6 weeks showed significant improvement in forced vital capacity (FVC) and peak expiratory flow rate (PEFR).

3. Effects on Cardiovascular System.^[4]

Pranayama influences the cardiovascular system primarily through modulation of the **autonomic nervous system** and **baroreceptor sensitivity**:

- **Heart Rate and Blood Pressure:** Slow breathing techniques like *Nadi Shodhana* and *Bhramari* reduce sympathetic tone and increase parasympathetic activity, resulting in lower heart rate and blood pressure.
- **Heart Rate Variability (HRV):** Enhanced HRV reflects improved cardiac vagal control, a marker of cardiovascular resilience.
- **Endothelial Function and Oxygenation:** Improved oxygen saturation and nitric oxide release from nasal breathing enhance vascular health.

- **Stress Reduction:** Reduction in cortisol and catecholamine levels through pranayama alleviates stress-induced cardiovascular load.

A clinical trial by Pal et al. (2004) revealed significant reduction in resting heart rate and systolic blood pressure in individuals practicing slow pranayama for three months.

4. Integration of Ayurveda and Modern Science.^[5]

From an Ayurvedic standpoint, pranayama promotes *Srotoshuddhi* (purification of channels) and balances *Vāta Dosha*, particularly *Prāṇa* and *Udana Vāta*, which govern respiration, speech, and cardiac functions. Modern physiology aligns this with the observed improvements in autonomic balance, lung elasticity, and vascular tone. Thus, pranayama serves as a bridge between traditional wisdom and modern preventive cardiopulmonary care.

CONCLUSION

Pranayama, deeply rooted in Ayurvedic philosophy, offers a holistic and evidence-based approach to enhancing cardiovascular and respiratory health. By harmonizing *Prāṇa Vāta* and optimizing autonomic function, it not only prevents diseases but also rejuvenates the entire system. Integration of pranayama into daily routines and preventive healthcare can significantly reduce the global burden of lifestyle-related disorders.

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