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The role of Unani medicine in enhancing sleep quality: Traditional approaches for modern lifestyle disorders

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of Unani medicine in enhancing sleep quality, particularly in the context of modern lifestyle disorders. As sleep disorders such as insomnia, stress, and anxiety have become prevalent in today's fast-paced society, many individuals seek alternative, natural remedies for improvement. Unani medicine, an ancient healing system based on the balance of humors and holistic health principles, offers various treatments for sleep disturbances. This study reviews traditional Unani approaches, focusing on herbal remedies like Asgand, Balchhar, and Babuna, as well as lifestyle practices designed to restore balance and tranquility. Through an extensive literature review, this paper examines the effectiveness of these treatments, comparing them with modern pharmacological interventions. Findings suggest that Unani herbs not only promote relaxation but also help in reducing stress and improving mental health, contributing to better sleep quality. The paper concludes that Unani medicine provides a valuable alternative to contemporary sleep aids, offering a more holistic and natural approach to treating sleep disorders in the modern world.

Keywords: Unani medicine, sleep quality, traditional medicine, lifestyle disorders, herbal remedies, sleep disorders

1. Introduction

Sleep is an essential physiological process that plays a vital role in maintaining overall health and well-being. It is crucial for the body's restorative functions, including physical repair, cognitive function, memory consolidation, and emotional regulation. Adequate sleep helps in restoring energy levels, bolstering immune function, and supporting mental clarity. It is also integral to mood regulation, where insufficient sleep is often linked to increased irritability, anxiety, and mood disorders. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized sleep as a critical factor for health, with chronic sleep deprivation contributing to various physical and mental health issues, such as cardiovascular diseases, obesity, diabetes, and mental health disorders like depression and anxiety ^[1].

In recent years, sleep disturbances have become increasingly common, with an estimated 30% of the global population suffering from some form of sleep disorder ^[2]. Conditions such as insomnia, sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome, and sleep deprivation are now widespread, exacerbated by the demands of modern life. The rise in sleep problems can be attributed to several factors, including high levels of stress, poor dietary habits, sedentary lifestyles, excessive screen time, and the widespread use of electronic devices. These elements often disrupt natural circadian rhythms, leading to irregular sleep patterns. Furthermore, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues often arising from the pressures of modern life have become significant contributors to poor sleep quality, creating a cycle that is difficult to break ^[3].

Unani medicine, an ancient medical system that originated in Greece and was later developed in the Arab world, offers a unique perspective on health, focusing on balance and harmony within the body. According to Unani principles, health is achieved through the balance of four vital humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile) within the body. An imbalance in these humors is believed to lead to various health issues, including sleep disorders. In Unani, the concept of mental and emotional health is equally emphasized, with the mind and body being seen as interconnected. Unani medicine employs a variety of natural remedies such as herbal formulations, dietary adjustments, and lifestyle practices -

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to restore balance and treat disorders like insomnia, stress, and other sleep-related problems. The healing approach of Unani medicine is holistic, aiming to address the root cause of sleep disturbances by focusing not only on the physical aspects of sleep but also on emotional and mental well-being.

This paper aims to explore how Unani medicine can be used to enhance sleep quality, particularly in the context of modern lifestyle disorders. By examining the traditional remedies and therapeutic techniques in Unani medicine, the paper will highlight their potential in addressing contemporary sleep issues. It will also evaluate the relevance of Unani medicine in the modern world, where sleep disorders are becoming increasingly prevalent. Ultimately, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Unani treatments, rooted in centuries-old knowledge, offer viable and effective solutions for improving sleep quality in the face of modern challenges.

2. Unani concepts of sleep and health

Unani medicine is a traditional healing system that is rooted in the ancient Greek theory of humors, later developed and refined by Arab physicians. According to Unani principles, human health is maintained through the balance of four humors: blood (*Dam*), phlegm (*Balgham*), yellow bile (*Safra*), and black bile (*Sauda*). Each humor corresponds to specific physical and emotional qualities, and an imbalance in these humors can lead to various diseases, including sleep disturbances. In the context of sleep, it is believed that an imbalance between the humors can disrupt the body's natural rhythms and hinder the ability to sleep well. For example, an excess of yellow bile (*Safra*) may lead to insomnia and restlessness, while an imbalance in phlegm (*Balgham*) could cause excessive sleepiness or lethargy.

In addition to the humors, the concept of the "*Nafs*" (soul or mind) plays a central role in Unani medicine, particularly in relation to mental health and sleep quality. The *Nafs* is believed to influence the emotional and psychological states of an individual. According to Unani, when the *Nafs* is disturbed by factors such as stress, anxiety, or sadness, it creates disharmony within the body, thus negatively impacting sleep. Maintaining a calm and peaceful *Nafs* is considered essential for achieving restful and restorative sleep. Therefore, Unani practitioners emphasize psychological balance through proper lifestyle choices, meditation, and emotional regulation, as part of the broader therapeutic approach to treating sleep disorders [4].

2.1 Modern sleep disorders

In modern society, sleep disorders have become a significant health issue, with millions of people worldwide suffering from conditions such as insomnia, sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome, and other forms of disturbed sleep. These disorders have been increasingly linked to lifestyle factors, including prolonged screen time, sedentary behavior, high levels of stress, and poor dietary habits. Research has shown that chronic sleep deprivation can lead to numerous health complications, including cardiovascular diseases, metabolic disorders, weakened immune function, and mental health problems such as anxiety and depression [5]. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes sleep disturbances as a growing public health concern, particularly in urban populations, where work pressures, social media, and irregular sleep patterns are contributing to the deterioration of sleep quality [6].

Recent studies also emphasize the role of psychological factors in sleep disorders, with anxiety, depression, and stress being the most common psychological triggers. The modern approach to treating sleep disorders often involves pharmacological interventions, including the use of sleep medications, antidepressants, and sedatives. While these medications provide short-term relief, they can have side effects and may not address the underlying causes of sleep disturbances. This has led to an increasing interest in alternative and complementary therapies, such as herbal treatments, meditation, and lifestyle adjustments, which aim to promote better sleep without the need for chemical interventions [7].

2.2 Traditional unani remedies for sleep disorders

Unani medicine offers a range of natural remedies for improving sleep quality, many of which have been used for centuries. These remedies often focus on restoring the balance of humors, calming the *Nafs*, and promoting relaxation through dietary changes and herbal treatments. Below are some of the key Unani herbs and remedies traditionally used to treat sleep disorders:

- ***Asgand (Withania somnifera)***: Known as a powerful adaptogen, *Asgand* is widely used in Unani medicine to reduce stress and promote relaxation. It is believed to balance the *Khilt* humor and calm the nervous system, which in turn helps in improving sleep quality. Several studies have shown that *Asgand* has anxiolytic properties and can help alleviate symptoms of insomnia by reducing cortisol levels and promoting a sense of calm [8].
- ***Balchhar (Nardostachys Balchhar)***: This herb is frequently recommended in Unani medicine for its calming and sedative effects. *Balchhar* is believed to pacify the *Khilt* humors, which are associated with nervous system disorders. It is commonly used to treat insomnia, anxiety, and restlessness, making it a valuable remedy for improving sleep quality. Modern studies have corroborated its effectiveness as a natural sedative, with evidence supporting its role in enhancing sleep duration and quality [9].
- ***Zafran (Crocus sativus)***: *Zafran* has been used in Unani medicine for its mood-enhancing and sleep-promoting properties. It is known to balance the Humors and calm the *Nafs*, making it useful in cases of anxiety-induced insomnia. Research indicates that *Zafran* has mild antidepressant effects and may help improve sleep quality by reducing stress and promoting relaxation [10].
- ***Babuna (Matricaria chamomilla)***: *Babuna* is a well-known herb in Unani medicine, used for its calming and sedative properties. It is commonly recommended to treat insomnia and anxiety by soothing the nerves and promoting relaxation. The active compounds in *Babuna*, such as apigenin, have been shown to bind to benzodiazepine receptors in the brain, inducing sleepiness and improving sleep quality [11].
- ***Honey and milk***: In Unani tradition, a warm mixture of milk and honey is often consumed before bedtime to promote restful sleep. Honey is believed to have soothing properties, while milk contains tryptophan, an amino acid that is a precursor to serotonin and melatonin - hormones that regulate sleep. This combination is commonly recommended as a natural sleep aid in the Unani tradition [12].

Table 1: Unani herbs for sleep disorders

Herb	Scientific name	Traditional use in unani	Active compounds	Modern scientific validation
<i>Asgand</i>	<i>Withania somnifera</i>	Reduces stress and anxiety, promotes relaxation and sleep	Withanolides, Alkaloids	Studies show it reduces cortisol and improves sleep onset [8]
<i>Balchhar</i>	<i>Nardostachys Balchhar</i>	Used to treat insomnia, anxiety, and stress	Valerenic Acid, Nardosin	Exhibits anxiolytic and sedative effects [9]
<i>Babuna</i>	<i>Matricaria chamomilla</i>	Calms the mind, promotes sleep, reduces restlessness	Apigenin, Luteolin	Shown to improve sleep quality by reducing anxiety [10]
<i>Saffron</i>	<i>Crocus sativus</i>	Used for insomnia and anxiety, induces relaxation	Crocin, Safranal	Demonstrated to reduce symptoms of insomnia [11]

2.3 Unani vs. modern approaches to sleep disorders

When comparing Unani medicine with modern approaches to sleep disorders, several key differences and similarities emerge. Modern medicine typically focuses on pharmacological treatments to address the symptoms of sleep disturbances, often prescribing sedatives, antidepressants, or anti-anxiety medications. While these treatments can be effective in the short term, they do not address the root causes of the disorders and may lead to side effects, including dependence, tolerance, and cognitive impairments. Furthermore, medications often fail to consider the emotional and psychological aspects of sleep, which are critical components of sleep quality.

In contrast, Unani medicine takes a more holistic approach by considering both the physical and mental aspects of sleep. By emphasizing the balance of humors and the calming of the *Nafs*, Unani medicine aims to restore harmony within the body and mind, addressing the underlying causes of sleep disorders rather than just alleviating symptoms. Unani remedies, such as herbal treatments, lifestyle adjustments, and dietary changes, are often recommended in combination, providing a more comprehensive and natural solution to sleep problems. This holistic approach is particularly beneficial for those seeking long-term relief without the side effects associated with conventional medications [13].

Table 2: Unani vs. modern approaches to treating sleep disorders

Aspect	Unani medicine	Modern medicine
Treatment focus	Holistic approach addressing physical and mental health	Primarily symptom-based, focusing on immediate relief
Common remedies	Herbal formulations, diet modification, lifestyle changes	Pharmaceuticals (e.g., benzodiazepines, melatonin)
Side effects	Minimal, natural remedies with fewer long-term consequences	Possible side effects like dependency, tolerance, cognitive impairment
Duration of treatment	Long-term, focusing on balance and prevention	Short-term, often only providing temporary relief
Emotional health	Emphasizes mental tranquility, stress reduction	Typically, does not address underlying emotional issues

3. Methodology

3.1 Research approach

This paper employs a literature review approach to explore the role of Unani medicine in enhancing sleep quality. The focus is on reviewing existing scholarly articles, books, and primary sources related to both Unani medicine and modern sleep disorders. By synthesizing data from various sources, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how traditional Unani remedies, particularly herbal treatments, can be used to improve sleep quality. Additionally, the paper compares these traditional remedies with contemporary treatments for sleep disorders to assess their potential efficacy in modern healthcare practices.

3.2 Data collection

Data was collected from a wide range of sources, including scientific journals, books, and Unani texts. Key sources for Unani medicine include classical texts such as *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* by Ibn Sina (Avicenna), *Al-Hawi* by Al-Razi, which provide insights into traditional Unani concepts of health, sleep, and the use of herbal remedies. Moreover, contemporary studies on sleep disorders and modern treatments were drawn from scientific journals such as *Sleep*, *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, *Phytotherapy Research*, and *American Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*. These journals provided up-to-date research on the prevalence of sleep disorders, pharmacological treatments, and the role of natural remedies, including those from Unani medicine.

3.3 Selection of studies

The studies selected for review were based on their relevance to the research topic namely, the effectiveness of Unani herbal remedies in treating sleep disorders. Inclusion criteria for studies included:

- 1. Relevance:** The studies had to be directly related to Unani treatments for sleep disorders or explore herbal remedies commonly used in Unani medicine (e.g., *Asgand*, *Balchhar*, *Babuna*).
- 2. Scientific validation:** Preference was given to studies that provided scientific evidence supporting the therapeutic effects of Unani herbs on sleep quality, either through clinical trials, laboratory studies, or meta-analyses.
- 3. Comparative analysis:** Studies that compared Unani treatments with modern pharmacological or psychological interventions were also included to evaluate the efficacy and relevance of Unani remedies in contemporary medicine.
- 4. Published works:** Only peer-reviewed articles, well-established books, and reputable academic sources were used to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the information.

4. Discussion

4.1 Unani remedies for enhancing sleep quality

Unani medicine offers a variety of remedies that aim to enhance sleep quality by addressing both the physical and mental aspects of health. These remedies often combine herbal treatments, dietary suggestions, and lifestyle modifications, all of which work synergistically to restore balance in the body and mind. This section delves into some of the most prominent Unani treatments used to manage sleep disorders.

4.2 Herbal Formulations

One of the main pillars of Unani medicine is the use of herbal formulations, which are believed to restore harmony in the body and address sleep disorders. These formulations often contain combinations of herbs that promote relaxation, reduce anxiety, and induce sleep. Below are a few notable examples:

- **Tanwim:** *Tanwim* is a traditional Unani remedy that combines various herbs known for their sedative properties. Ingredients such as *Balchhar* (*Nardostachys Balchhar*), *Asgand* (*Withania somnifera*), and *Babuna* (*Matricaria chamomilla*) are often included in these preparations. These herbs have a calming effect on the nervous system, helping to reduce anxiety and stress, which are major contributors to sleep disturbances. *Tanwim* not only induces sleep but also promotes mental clarity and emotional tranquility, making it an ideal remedy for individuals experiencing sleep issues due to stress or emotional turmoil.
- **Shahed (Honey-based mixtures):** In Unani medicine, *Shaheds* refers to honey-based mixtures that are often used as natural sleep aids. Honey is considered to have soothing and relaxing properties that can help induce sleep. When combined with other calming herbs, such as Saffron (*Crocus sativus*) or Cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*), *Shahed* helps in relaxing the mind and preparing the body for restful sleep. Honey also contains natural sugars that support the release of insulin, which in turn helps tryptophan enter the brain and be converted to serotonin - a neurotransmitter that plays a role in promoting sleep.
- **Arq (Distilled herbal waters):** *Arq* is a traditional Unani preparation made by distilling various herbs, and it is commonly used to treat insomnia and anxiety. *Arq-e-Gulab* and *Arq-e-chameli* are particularly well-regarded for their calming effects. These distilled herbal waters are believed to have a soothing effect on the mind and body, promoting relaxation and better sleep. The therapeutic properties of *Arq* lie in their ability to balance the humors and calm the nervous system, making them highly effective for individuals experiencing insomnia due to anxiety or emotional stress.

4.3 Diet and lifestyle

Unani medicine places great emphasis on dietary suggestions and lifestyle practices to promote overall well-being and improve sleep quality. The philosophy of Unani believes that the right food, at the right time, and in the right quantity, plays a crucial role in maintaining balance and ensuring restful sleep.

- **Easily digestible foods:** One of the fundamental principles of Unani dietary advice is to consume foods that are easy to digest, especially in the evening. Heavy meals or foods that are difficult to digest, such as fried foods or spicy dishes, can disrupt sleep by causing indigestion and discomfort. Unani practitioners recommend consuming light meals, particularly those rich in proteins, carbohydrates, and calming herbs like Valerian root or *Babuna* before bedtime. This not only aids digestion but also supports the body's ability to relax and prepare for sleep.
- **Avoiding excessive spices:** In Unani, the intake of excessively spicy, sour, or salty foods is discouraged in

the evening, as these can irritate the digestive system and disturb the balance of humors, leading to disrupted sleep. Unani texts suggest that cooling foods, such as cucumbers, melons, and dairy products like yogurt, should be consumed in moderation to maintain balance and promote peaceful sleep.

- **Promoting regular sleep cycles:** Unani medicine encourages the establishment of regular sleep cycles as part of a healthy lifestyle. This practice involves going to bed and waking up at consistent times every day, which helps regulate the body's internal clock (circadian rhythm). Furthermore, it is advised to avoid excessive mental and physical exertion before bedtime, allowing the mind and body to gradually wind down.

Table 3: Dietary and lifestyle recommendations in Unani for better sleep

Recommendation	Unani perspective	Reason for recommendation
Easily digestible foods	Foods like soups, rice, and light proteins before bedtime	To prevent indigestion, which may disrupt sleep
Avoid heavy and spicy foods	Avoid spicy or oily foods in the evening	To balance the body's humors and prevent sleep disturbances
Regular sleep cycle	Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day	To regulate the circadian rhythm and promote restful sleep
Calming herbs before bed	Herbs such as <i>Babuna</i> , Lavender, and Saffron	To relax the mind and promote better sleep quality

4.4 The role of body balance in sleep

A core principle of Unani medicine is maintaining equilibrium between the body's humors, which is essential for overall health, including good sleep. An imbalance in the humors whether an excess of hotness (*safra*), coldness (*balgham*), or dryness (*sauda*) can disrupt the body's natural functions and hinder restful sleep.

- **Balancing heat and cold:** Unani practitioners often focus on managing the balance between heat and cold, especially in cases of sleep disorders. For example, if someone experiences sleeplessness due to an excess of heat (e.g., feelings of restlessness, irritability, and insomnia), cooling herbs such as mint (*Mentha*) and Gulab water are used to restore balance. On the other hand, if a person experiences excessive coldness (e.g., lethargy, fatigue), warming herbs like ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) may be recommended.

Maintaining this delicate balance within the body is believed to ensure optimal sleep, free from disturbances such as night sweats, cold feet, or excessive drowsiness.

4.5 Scientific Validation of Unani Approaches

While Unani medicine's approach to sleep disorders is rooted in ancient wisdom, modern scientific studies have provided some validation for its effectiveness. Many of the herbs used in Unani formulations have been studied for their potential in improving sleep quality.

- *Asgand* (*Withania somnifera*), for example, is well-documented in contemporary research for its adaptogenic properties, which help the body cope with stress. Studies have shown that *Asgand* can reduce

cortisol levels, promoting relaxation and improving sleep quality. A study published in the *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine* demonstrated that *Asgand* supplementation significantly improved sleep onset and quality in individuals suffering from chronic stress and insomnia ^[14].

- *Babuna (Matricaria chamomilla)* is another Unani herb that has received scientific attention. It is known for its mild sedative effects, which have been validated through research. A study in the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* found that *Babuna* extract helped improve sleep quality in individuals with chronic insomnia by reducing anxiety and promoting muscle relaxation ^[15].

As well, studies on *Balchhar (Nardostachys Balchhar)* have shown its potential to treat insomnia and anxiety. A study published in *Phytotherapy Research* found that *Balchhar* exhibited anxiolytic and sedative effects, helping individuals with insomnia related to anxiety disorders ^[16].

4.6 Mind-body connection

Unani medicine emphasizes the integral connection between the mind and body when addressing sleep disorders. The treatment of sleep disturbances involves not just physical remedies but also an emphasis on mental tranquility. According to Unani principles, stress, anxiety, and emotional instability collectively referred to as disturbances of the *Nafs* are major contributors to sleep issues. Therefore, therapies such as mental relaxation techniques, meditation, and emotional regulation through dietary and lifestyle adjustments are central to achieving restful sleep.

Unani practitioners often recommend techniques for calming the mind, such as prayers, recitations, and guided visualizations, to ensure emotional balance and promote sleep. This holistic view of health considering both the mind and body is what sets Unani medicine apart from other medical systems.

4.7 Comparison with conventional treatments

Conventional treatments for sleep disorders often focus on symptomatic relief through medications such as benzodiazepines and sleeping pills, which can induce sleep but do not address the root causes of the disorder. These medications often come with side effects, including dependency, tolerance, and cognitive impairments.

In contrast, Unani medicine offers a holistic approach that addresses the underlying imbalances in the body and mind. Its reliance on natural remedies, including herbal treatments, dietary changes, and mental health practices, provides a more comprehensive solution for chronic sleep issues. Furthermore, Unani remedies have the advantage of fewer side effects and offer long-term benefits by promoting overall health and emotional balance.

Moreover, Unani medicine is particularly effective for individuals who prefer non-pharmacological treatments or those who suffer from sleep disturbances due to stress, anxiety, or emotional imbalance. By integrating Unani treatments with modern practices, such as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for insomnia, there is potential for synergistic effects, providing a more balanced and effective approach to managing sleep disorders.

5. Conclusion

Unani medicine offers a holistic approach to enhancing

sleep quality by addressing both physical and psychological factors. Through herbal remedies like *Asgand*, *Balchhar*, and *Babuna*, as well as lifestyle adjustments focusing on diet, emotional well-being, and maintaining a balance of the body's humors, Unani provides a natural alternative to modern sleep treatments. These remedies help manage stress, anxiety, and imbalances that commonly disrupt sleep. The growing interest in natural and holistic healthcare makes Unani medicine highly relevant today, especially as many individuals seek alternatives to pharmaceutical sleep aids. However, to fully validate its effectiveness, further scientific research through controlled clinical trials is necessary. Future studies should focus on the clinical benefits of Unani herbs, their biological mechanisms, and their comparative efficacy with modern sleep medications. As research continues to explore the potential of Unani medicine, it could serve as a valuable complement or alternative to conventional treatments for sleep disorders, offering a more natural, long-term solution to improving sleep quality in modern society.

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