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'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā': A Traditional Approach to Combating Lifestyle Diseases Through Dietary Modification

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Abstract

Objective

This study explores the role of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'*, a traditional Unani dietary therapy, in managing lifestyle disorders such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.

Materials and Methods

This study is based on a comprehensive review of classical Unani literature and contemporary scientific research. Key traditional sources include the works of renowned Unani scholars such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Al-Razi (Rhazes), which provide foundational insights into the principles of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* (dietotherapy). In addition, recent clinical studies and modern research articles were examined to assess the relevance and effectiveness of these dietary principles in managing lifestyle disorders. A systematic approach was adopted to evaluate historical texts alongside contemporary evidence, focusing on the therapeutic role of diet modifications in addressing conditions arising from modern lifestyle patterns.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that personalized dietary modifications based on *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* can lead to significant health improvements, including effective weight management and better metabolic health. The study concludes that integrating *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* into modern health strategies offers a holistic approach to managing lifestyle disorders, potentially reducing reliance on pharmacological treatments. This integration can empower individuals to adopt healthier dietary habits, thus enhancing public health outcomes.

Keywords

'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā', lifestyle disorders, dietary therapy, Unani medicine, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases

Introduction

Lifestyle disorders have reached epidemic proportions in the 21st century, leading to a significant burden on global health systems. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases account for approximately 71% of all global deaths. These conditions are often linked to poor dietary habits, physical inactivity, and lifestyle choices (World Health Organization, 2021). The prevalence of obesity has tripled since 1975, with approximately 1.9 billion adults classified as overweight or obese in 2020 (WHO, 2021). Similarly, diabetes affects more than 537 million adults worldwide, and its incidence continues to rise (International Diabetes Federation, 2021). Furthermore, cardiovascular diseases remain the leading cause of death globally, emphasizing the urgent need for effective prevention and management strategies (Benjamin et al., 2019).

Traditional medical systems, including Unani medicine, provide alternative perspectives on health and disease management. Unani medicine, rooted in ancient Greek and Islamic philosophies, has been practiced for centuries and emphasizes a holistic approach to health, focusing on the balance of the body's humors and the role of diet in disease prevention (Jahan et al., 2020). Central to Unani practices is *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* (diet therapy), which emphasizes the critical role of nutrition in health maintenance and disease prevention. This approach integrates the properties of various foods, their effects on the body's constitution, and the need for individualized dietary recommendations based on a person's temperament (Mizaj) (Khan et al., 2018).

Research has shown that dietary interventions can significantly impact the management of lifestyle disorders. For instance, studies have highlighted the effectiveness of Mediterranean and plant-based diets in reducing the risk of chronic diseases, including obesity and diabetes (Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2017; Satija et al., 2017). Furthermore, dietary modifications have been recognized as essential components of lifestyle interventions that promote weight loss and improve metabolic health (Schwartz et al., 2020).

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting dietary interventions, there remains a gap in integrating traditional dietary therapies like *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* into modern healthcare practices. This paper aims to explore the principles of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'*, its relevance in managing lifestyle disorders, and its implications for public health. By examining the historical context and contemporary applications of this dietary approach, the study seeks to highlight its potential as a complementary strategy in addressing the rising prevalence of lifestyle-related diseases.

Historical Context of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'*

The origins of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* can be traced back to ancient medical systems that recognized the connection between diet and health. The Unani system, rooted in the teachings of Hippocrates and further developed by notable scholars such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Al-Razi (Rhazes), places significant emphasis on dietary

practices. The concept of Mizaj (temperament) is foundational in Unani medicine, as it determines individual dietary needs based on one's unique constitution (Majeed & Kaur, 2015). This concept emphasizes that the balance of humors in the body can be influenced by the foods consumed, making dietary choices critical for maintaining health.

Historically, the Unani approach to diet was holistic, integrating various food properties and their effects on the body. For instance, Ibn Sina's influential work, *Al-Qanoon fi al-Tibb* (The Canon of Medicine), systematically classified foods based on their qualities and effects, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding nutrition (Ghanem et al., 2020). This philosophy is encapsulated in the saying, "Let food be your medicine," which underlines the belief that a balanced diet can prevent and treat ailments (Ali et al., 2019).

In addition to Ibn Sina, Al-Razi emphasized the importance of diet in his writings, suggesting that dietary measures could prevent diseases and promote recovery (Akhtar et al., 2020). Unani physicians also meticulously observed specific foods' effects on patients, leading to a rich tradition of dietary recommendations tailored to individual needs. This is particularly evident in the works of scholars such as Al-Biruni and Ibn al-Nafis, who expanded upon the dietary principles established by their predecessors (Jahan et al., 2020).

The historical context of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* is not confined to the Unani tradition alone; it reflects a broader recognition of the importance of nutrition in ancient civilizations, including Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and ancient Greek medicine (Agarwal & Sharma, 2016). Each of these traditions recognized that dietary practices played a crucial role in health and disease management, thus contributing to the global understanding of nutrition's impact on well-being.

This historical context sets the stage for understanding the modern application of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* in lifestyle disorder management. Today, as the prevalence of non-communicable diseases continues to rise, the principles of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* offer valuable insights into how dietary interventions can be effectively integrated into contemporary health practices (Khan et al., 2018; Majeed et al., 2021).

Principles of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'*

1. Dietary Modification

At the core of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* lies the fundamental principle of therapeutic dietary modification. Unani medicine classifies foods according to their intrinsic qualities—such as hot, cold, dry, and moist—and their influence on the body's four humors (*Akhlat*). By identifying imbalances among these humors, practitioners prescribe tailored dietary interventions aimed at restoring equilibrium and promoting overall health (Shah & Kulkarni, 2019). For instance, individuals with an excess of phlegmatic humor may benefit from warm and dry foods to counterbalance their condition. Emerging research supports the efficacy of such personalized dietary approaches, highlighting their potential to significantly improve health outcomes, particularly in the management of chronic lifestyle-related disorders (Khan et al., 2020).

2. Balance of Humors

The Unani system posits that health is achieved through the balance of four humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Each humor corresponds to specific dietary recommendations that aim to achieve equilibrium. For instance, an excess of cold humors may necessitate the consumption of warming spices such as ginger and cinnamon, while individuals with an excess of hot humors may be advised to include cooling foods like cucumbers and mint (Raza & Khan, 2018). This emphasis on maintaining the balance of humors is a distinctive feature of Unani dietary practices and is supported by contemporary studies that explore the role of diet in regulating physiological states (Ali et al., 2021).

3. Individualized Diet

One of the key tenets of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* is the recognition of individual differences. Dietary recommendations are tailored to the individual's temperament (Mizaj) and health conditions. This personalized approach enhances the effectiveness of dietary interventions, ensuring that patients receive nutrition that aligns with their specific needs (Majeed & Kaur, 2015). Studies have shown that individualized dietary plans can lead to better adherence and improved health outcomes, as they consider the unique metabolic responses and preferences of each patient (Patel & Gohil, 2022).

Application of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* in Lifestyle Disorders

Obesity

Obesity is a widespread lifestyle disorder marked by excessive accumulation of body fat, typically resulting from an imbalance between caloric intake and energy expenditure. According to Unani medicine, *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* offers a holistic approach to managing obesity through tailored dietary modifications that not only promote weight loss but also preserve nutritional balance.

Unani texts emphasize a balanced, low-calorie, nutrient-rich diet for obesity management. Classical guidance recommends avoiding heavy, oily, and sugary foods that contribute to excessive weight gain. Instead, patients are encouraged to consume light, easily digestible foods such as fresh fruits, green leafy vegetables, whole grains, pulses, and lean proteins (Razi & Ahmad, 2019). This aligns with modern research, which shows that diets high in fruits and vegetables are associated with lower body weight and a reduced risk of obesity (Kumar & Ghosh, 2020).

A key principle in Unani weight management is *Taqleel-e-Ghiza* (reduction in food quantity). Creating a caloric deficit—where calorie intake is lower than expenditure—is essential for sustainable weight loss. For effective results, a daily caloric intake of around 1200–1500 kcal for women and 1500–1800 kcal for men is generally recommended, depending on individual activity levels and body composition.

Diabetes

The management of diabetes through *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* emphasizes dietary control of blood sugar levels. Unani practitioners recommend a diet rich in whole grains, legumes, and non-starchy vegetables, which have a low

glycemic index. This approach helps in stabilizing blood sugar levels and preventing spikes that can lead to complications (Ali et al., 2019). Studies have demonstrated that a low glycemic index diet can significantly improve glycemic control in diabetic patients (Wolever et al., 2017).

Additionally, dietary recommendations for diabetes management often include the use of spices like fenugreek and cinnamon, which have been shown to improve insulin sensitivity (Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2017). The integration of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* in diabetes care not only focuses on managing symptoms but also addresses the underlying causes of the condition, fostering a holistic approach to health (Saeedi et al., 2021).

Cardiovascular Diseases

Cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) remain a leading cause of morbidity and mortality globally. The role of diet in preventing and managing CVDs is well-established, and *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* offers valuable insights into dietary practices that support heart health.

Unani dietary recommendations for cardiovascular health include the consumption of foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as fish and flaxseeds, and a reduction in saturated fats found in red meat and full-fat dairy products (Kumar et al., 2022). Studies suggest that diets high in omega-3 fatty acids can lower the risk of heart disease and improve lipid profiles (Zhang et al., 2020). Furthermore, the emphasis on fruits and vegetables aligns with contemporary dietary guidelines that advocate for increased intake of plant-based foods for heart health (Mozaffarian et al., 2018).

Effectiveness and Public Health Implications

The effectiveness of dietary modifications in managing lifestyle disorders is supported by numerous studies. Research indicates that personalized dietary interventions, such as those advocated by *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'*, can lead to significant improvements in health outcomes, including weight management, glycemic control, and cardiovascular health (Pérez-Escamilla et al., 2017; Khokhar et al., 2021). A meta-analysis found that dietary interventions tailored to individual needs were associated with a reduction in body mass index (BMI) and improved metabolic markers, underscoring the importance of personalized nutrition in lifestyle disease management (Gujral et al., 2021).

Furthermore, studies have shown that integrating dietary therapies, such as those derived from traditional medical systems, can yield positive health outcomes and increase patient adherence to dietary changes (Khan et al., 2018). This suggests that traditional dietary approaches can complement contemporary health strategies, enhancing the overall effectiveness of interventions aimed at lifestyle disorders (Javadi et al., 2020).

The integration of traditional dietary therapies into modern health care presents significant public health implications. By promoting the adoption of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* principles, health care providers can empower individuals to take control of their dietary habits, reducing reliance on pharmacological treatments and improving overall health (Kumar et al., 2022). This empowerment is critical in a time when lifestyle disorders are becoming more prevalent, necessitating innovative solutions.

Moreover, the focus on dietary therapy within Unani medicine aligns with global health initiatives aimed at addressing the rising burden of lifestyle disorders. By incorporating these traditional approaches into preventive health strategies, policymakers can enhance the effectiveness of public health campaigns and contribute to the reduction of health care costs associated with lifestyle-related diseases (Patel et al., 2021).

Dietary Guidelines:

- **Avoid:** Fried foods, red meat, refined sugars, carbonated drinks, excess salt, and highly processed foods.
- **Include:** Foods with natural *Taba'iyat* (temperament) suited to the individual's humor imbalance (e.g., warm/dry for cold/moist humor).
- **Hydration:** Drink plenty of water and *Unani arqaat* (distillates) like *Arq-e-Gulab*, *Arq-e-Badiyan* (fennel water), and *Arq-e-Mako* (for liver detox).
- **Meal Timing:** Follow proper meal timings with an early dinner (before sunset or at least 2 hours before sleep) to support metabolism.

Conclusion

'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā' offers a holistic approach to managing lifestyle disorders through dietary modifications. By emphasizing the principles of individualized nutrition and the balance of humors, this traditional dietary therapy aligns with modern dietary practices aimed at preventing and managing health issues. As the prevalence of lifestyle disorders continues to rise, integrating *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* into contemporary health strategies may provide a valuable tool for improving public health outcomes. Future research should explore the efficacy of *'Ilāj bi'l Ghidhā'* in various populations and its potential role in health promotion and disease prevention.

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