

## An Introduction to Ayurvedic Nutrition

*Eat to live, and eat to live long healthfully. These are principles that apply to the philosophy of Ayurvedic Nutrition. Health is dynamic and the food choices an individual makes can restore, and even improve, health.*

Ayurvedic Medicine is a complete medical system from India that dates back 5,000 years in India and is practiced in many parts of the World today. In terms of its rich history, it is very new to the United States. However, Ayurvedic medicine is gaining interest and popularity quickly as Americans seek health care options that treat them *holistically* – dealing with the whole body as opposed to isolated symptoms or parts of the body.

The word, *Ayurveda*, in Sanskrit roughly means the “science or knowledge of life.” Other Ayurvedic experts, however, contend that *Ayurveda* is even more accurately translated as the “science or knowledge of *longevity*.” As such, it focuses on comprehensively addressing the body and preventing disease by reestablishing equilibrium. When balance is achieved, longevity – living a long, healthy, active and productive life – can be obtained.

The fundamental philosophy of this medical system is that *health is dynamic*, constantly changing, and that the body is a marvelously complex system that *seeks health*. There is always an opportunity to improve health, reestablish balance and get well with Ayurvedic medicine. Health is influenced on a *constant basis* by diet and lifestyle choices. It is no surprise, therefore, that constant abuse on the body including poor dietary and lifestyle choices can lead to ill health or disease.

### **The Doshas**

In Ayurvedic Medical philosophy there are 3 principle life-forces – or *Doshas* – in the body called *Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*. They correspond to the elements of air, fire and water, respectively. *Doshas* is an Ayurvedic term that means something that darkens, spoils or causes decay. *Doshas* can also be translated as “things that go out of whack.” When the life-forces are out of balance, these *Doshas* are the causative forces in the disease process. Each of the three *Doshas* has primary qualities and characteristics that define them. Very simply, when they are in balance, there is health; when they are deficient or in excess, there is sickness.

Each individual is governed by all the *Doshas*, but one often predominates over the others. *Vata* is the air life-force, the one that helps govern the movement of the other *Doshas*. It is responsible for the nervous system, controlling the body’s movement, and balancing the senses, mental capacity, and comprehension. *Pitta* is the fire life-force and governs all the chemical and metabolic “digestive” processes in the body. In Ayurvedic medicine – as well as Traditional Chinese

Medicine – practitioners often talk about the “digestive fire” that helps us digest, absorb and utilize our nutrients – somewhat like a fire that consumes wood to produce heat, light, and energy.

*Kapha* is the water life-force, translated as “phlegm,” and provides substance and holds things together in the body. *Kapha* controls the secretions of the body, lubricates the joints, and is responsible for providing emotional support, and governing positive emotions like love, compassion, modesty, patience and forgiveness. These are very simplified explanations of terms and ideas that have 5,000 years of science and far more detail than can be explained here.

While these definitions may seem rather abstract and hard to understand, try to think of these life-forces as a combination of qualities that make up the *whole person* in a certain balance that supports health. No single combination is ideal, although excess or deficiency of any part of an individual’s constitutional makeup can lead to physical or mental health problems.

Ayurvedic medical professionals diagnose disease based on the *individual constitution* of each patient. A person’s constitution is determined based on a thorough assessment of a myriad of physical and psychological needs and characteristics including dietary requirements, along with environmental influences like exercise, climate, and stressors of each individual. There are eight possible constitutional types. Based on a patient’s constitution as defined by the *Doshas* and other diagnostic criteria, treatment recommendations are made by the Ayurvedic practitioner. Ayurvedic medicine is a true mind-body medical system treating the human being as one whole person and not a single set of symptoms.

### **What is Ayurvedic Nutrition?**

Ayurvedic medicine is based on the notion that poor nutrition is the main cause of disease. At the same time, therefore, food can also be the most powerful medicine in providing adequate nutrition and nourishment for the body and mind. Ayurvedic nutrition is an individualized approach to the diet, based on one’s constitutional make-up and current health status.

Today, people are increasingly interested in an individualized approach to diet and nutrition. One only needs to look around to see that people come in different shapes and sizes, have different personalities, and different tastes and preferences in food, art, activities, careers, and in all aspects of life.

In Ayurvedic medicine, food is central to life, and life is, in essence, a continual search for food. The one-size-fits-all approach to diet doesn’t work according to Ayurvedic nutrition since different people have unique nutritional, physical, psychological and physiological needs for nourishment. The old saying “one man’s food is another man’s poison” holds true in Ayurvedic nutrition since individual food choices can bring health or illness depending on one’s unique

constitution. And any substance can ultimately act as food, medicine or poison. Food does not only nourish the body, as we are most familiar in Western cultures, but the mind and the spirit, as well.

Nutrition is so central to Ayurvedic medicine that 6 “tastes” govern various aspects of health – not only reflecting the food or seasonings we consume. The six tastes include Sweet, Sour, Salty, Pungent, Bitter, and Astringent, and are linked to the five great elements of earth, fire, water, air and ether.

The 6 tastes influence the balance of the *Doshas* in the body. Remembering that when the *Doshas* are out of balance, things “go out of whack” and lead to illness, the amount of each of the 6 tastes an individual consumes becomes important in controlling how much of each *Dosha* is produced. Each of the tastes affects the constant production of the life-forces, *Doshas*, and can maintain balance in the body or alternately cause imbalance. As complex as this may seem, a rather simple dietary plan can emerge that incorporates all of the tastes in a way that promotes optimal health.

There are specific foods recommended for each constitution, but it is in balancing the 6 tastes through the foods we consume that can maximize and restore health.

### **Food is Life**

*Aaharah praanah* means “food is a synonym for life”. In Ayurvedic nutrition, not only does the actual food consumed nourish the body and mind, but the surrounding activities that accompany food selection, preparation and consumption are also important. There are techniques and qualities to the selection and preparation of good whole foods. The ritual of eating and the company in which a person eats influence one’s health and well-being. The energy spent in all aspects surrounding nourishment ultimately impacts the balance of the *Doshas* and the constant dynamic action of the body.

### **Goal of Nutrition in Ayurvedic Medicine**

In Ayurvedic medicine, the goal is to restore and improve health through practices that lead to balance. This is achieved through following individualized guidelines according to one’s own constitutional make-up in terms of food, exercise, and other health-promoting behaviors. People interested in Ayurvedic nutrition should seek an individualized approach from a trained and licensed professional in Ayurvedic medicine.

Because each person is unique and has his or her own constitutional make-up, there is no single set of nutritional guidelines to follow. However, a few general ideas do cross-over and apply to many Americans.

- Cut down (or avoid) highly refined, processed foods and increase intake of whole foods.
- Include all six of the flavors in the diet on a regular basis.

- Pay attention to portion sizes: eat quality, not quantity.
- Eat lunch as the main meal of the day.
- Vary the tastes, types, and textures of foods consumed.
- Don't overdo on the "sweet" or sugary foods. Americans tend to over consume this *taste*.
- Incorporate activities to reduce stress like exercise, massage or meditation instead of trying to "eat" your stress away.

Since every person's digestion and metabolism works differently, Ayurvedic nutrition focuses on an individual approach to foods, tastes, and establishes guidelines to help revitalize the body through diet and nutrition. There is no magic pill or remedy to take on a temporary basis; it is a lifestyle to adopt and participate in actively in order to maintain, *or even improve*, health through nutrition. The science or knowledge of longevity – *Ayurveda* – is the daily, dynamic practice of health-promoting behaviors that lead to balance and wellness of the body and mind.

*References:*

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