

AHARA (DIET) IN AYURVEDA AND ITS RESEMBLANCE TO THE MODERN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Food is an essential requirement in life and one can attain good health by following a proper, natural diet. Most health problems develop due to the wrong eating habits and cooking methods. Out of the three upasthambhas (supports of life), i.e. ahara (diet), nidra (sleep) and brahmacharya (observance of celibacy); the first one has been given more importance and considered to be the best in Ayurveda. A proper, optimum and skillful use of these triads, human body to maintain its integrity, being enriched with bala (physical and immunological strength), varna (complexion) and upachaya (growth of nourishment), till full length of life, provided the person concerned does not get involved in the regimen detrimental to health. Nutrition is the most important because from a proper wholesome and balanced diet, all the body constituents— dosha, dhatu and mala—are formed. That is why it is said that 'we are what we eat'. Food is not only essential for our physical well-being but it provides nutrition for our mind as well. Classical Ayurveda texts cover an array of themes on food ranging from the diversity of natural sources, their properties in relation to seasons and places and to their specific function both in physiological and pathological states. Foods and drinks with desirable smell, taste and touch and having been taken according to the prescribed method are said as vital strength by the experts on the basis of observing their results directly because the condition of internal fire depends on their fuel. They produce energy in mind, the constitution of dhatus, strength, complexion and clarity of sense organs, if properly taken; otherwise, they become harmful.

Key-words: Ayurveda, Ahara, Diet, Nutrition, Dhatu

Introduction

Ayurveda has strongly advised that a person should never consume food out of greed or when he is unaware of what he eats. One should knowingly and decidedly eat food. Living body is principally grown out of food; hence it is vital to test what a person is consuming. Diet and nutrition are most important for health and equally important in management of disorders. The maximum nutrition disorders were identified in the 18th-19th century and after that the concept of the diet and nutrition became the area of interest for the researchers. Dietetics is the science which applies the principle of nutrition, to the planning and preparation of food and regulation of the diet in relation to both maintenance of health and treatment of diseases.

Food (*Ahara*) requires for energy of life, growth & development process, repair mechanism and maintenance of normal physiological functioning of body. Ayurveda considered diet as one of the *Upastambha* amongst the *Tri-Upastambha*. The *Ahara* associated with *Pancha Mahabhootas* i.e.; *Prithvi*, *Ap*, *Teja*, *Vayu* and *Akasha*. The consumption of appropriate food helps to balances *Tridoshas* i.e. *Vata*, *Pitta* & *Kapha* thus maintain good health status.

Diet in Ayurveda

The word diet is derived from the Greek "Diaita", meaning mode of life, a word that until the last century was often used in a much broader sense than its current meaning. Ayurveda the traditional system of India describes 'Aahar' in two

meanings i.e. the act of food intake and for food items. Whatever is eaten with mouth or ingested is called Aahar. Food has been considered as life of living beings. Thus diet is not only necessary to living long (*Annam vrittikaranam*), but also necessary for good health. Food eaten in proper amount, with all rules and regulations sustains the life, refreshes all sense organs, organs of functions along with mind, nourishes all *dhatavah* (tissues), increases memory, intelligence, strength, *oja*, provides good complexion and luster to the body.

The improper diets may cause imbalances of *Doshas* leading to the adverse health effects and induces diseases. *Kala Yoga*, *Swabhava Samsiddhi*, *Ahara Sausthava* and absence of *Avighata*, etc. are the factors which affect growth of the body. Ingested food should be of good quality for promoting growth and development of body.

As per Ayurveda the nutritional value of food increases if consumed in proper quality, according to the constitution and digestive power of individual person. The seasonal variation and diseased state of person also affects requirement of dietary materials. The cooking procedures, timing of meal and combination of food ingredients affects quality of *Ahara*. The awful dietary habit leads many pathological conditions and diseases associated with wrong dietary habits are depicted in **Figure 1**.



Figure 1: Common diseases associated with awful dietary habits

These disorders mainly arise due to the faulty diet habits and good dietary regimen (*Pathya*) can help to prevent consequences of such disorders. The balanced dietary habits help to maintain homeostasis of *Panchamahabhootas*; *Prithvi*, *Ap*, *Teja*, *Vayu* and *Akasha*. The food that affects *Vata* controls *Vayu* and *Akasha mahabhoota*, similarly diets which affect *Pitta* controls *Agni mahabhoota* while *Kapha* balancing food maintain homeostasis of *Jala* and *Pruthvi mahabhoota*.

Food either aggravates *Doshas* or pacify them, the *Rasa* and *Guna* of *Ahara* alter *Doshas* thus food containing appropriate combination of *Rasa* and *Guna* according to the season, age and *Prakriti* of individual maintain balance of *Doshas*. The food containing disproportionate amount of *Rasa* and *Guna* may aggravates specific *Doshas*, however other factors like environmental conditions, quantity of meal and timing of meal, etc. also play vital role towards the physiological impacts of food materials.

The *Shadrassa* (six basic tastes) has predominance of particular elements thus food containing specific

Rasa affects *Panchamahabhootas*, *Tridoshas* & *Dhatu*s. The *Rasa* of foods related with *Panchamahabhootas* as follows:

- ✓ *Madhura Rasa* predominant with *Prithvi* & *Aap Mahabhootas*
- ✓ *Amla Rasa* predominant with *Prithvi* & *Agni Mahabhootas*
- ✓ *Lavana Rasa* predominant with *Aap* & *Agni Mahabhootas*
- ✓ *Katu Rasa* predominant with *Agni* & *Vayu Mahabhootas*
- ✓ *Tikta Rasa* predominant with *Vayu* & *Akash Mahabhootas*
- ✓ *Kashaya Rasa* predominant with *Prithvi* & *Vayu Mahabhootas*

As mentioned above that taste of food is related with *Mahabhootas*, similarly these *Rasa* also affects *Doshas*. The food possessing sweet, sour and salty taste may alleviate *Vata*, while foods having astringent, sweet and bitter tastes may alleviate *Pitta* and food articles having astringent and pungent tastes alleviate *Kapha dosha*. Therefore one should consume food according to his/her *Doshic* predominance.

Ayurveda described different attributes related to the foods

which may affect quality and health impacts of food articles:

- ✚ Qualitative characteristics of the food
- ✚ Processing of food
- ✚ *Samyoga* (mixing of food articles)
- ✚ *Rashi* (quantity of food)
- ✚ *Desha* (natural habitat of person)
- ✚ *Kala* (timing of meal & seasonal variation)
- ✚ *Upayoga Samstha* (variable digestibility of different food articles)
- ✚ *Upayokta*

Discussion

“Food” denoted by the term *Ahara*, is one among the three pillars that support life, the other two being *nidra* (sleep) and *brahmacharya* (measured celibacy). The terms *pathya* (compatible) and *apathya* (incompatible) are used to denote the acceptability and adoptability of a particular food in a given context. Adhering to these rules in daily life will enable in preventing dysfunction of the *agni*, thereby evading formation of *ama* and maintain *tridosha* homeostasis. Ayurvedic dietetics can be construed under three categories viz. Selection of food (What to eat), Timing of food (When to eat) and Rules of consumption (How to eat).

➤ Selection of food

Customization of diet is carried out based on many factors, among which important ones are *Prakriti*, *Guna* (Attributes), *Samskara* (Processing), *Sathmya* (homogeneity), *Vaya* (Age), *Desa* (Habitat) and *Kala* (Seasons).

➤ Selection of food based on prakriti

As stated earlier, recommendations on diet, lifestyle and drugs vary based on one's *prakriti*. Individuals of *Kapha* predominant *prakriti* are slow metabolizers, Hence, they are advised to undergo periodic fasting, consume small

meals, especially with pungent, bitter, and astringent tastes. *Pitta prakriti* individuals are fast metabolizers, can digest heavy food and require large quantities in frequent intervals. They have to avoid excess of spices and foods with pungent, salty, and sour taste. The individuals of *Vata* predominant *prakriti* have variable metabolic pattern, eat fast and consume small amounts. They are advised to consume food items with higher fat content like clarified butter, edible oils, meat etc. and hot food and beverages.

➤ The selection of food items

Food items have been classified based on their inherent attributes, one example being *guru* (heavy to digest) and *laghu* (light to digest). For instance, black gram is heavy and difficult to digest whereas green lentil is light and easy to digest. In case of earlier description about *prakriti*, application of this *guna* concept is important in determining the food items for each *prakriti*, for e.g. in an individual with *kapha* type of *prakriti*, since *kapha* is *guru* (heavy) and *snigdha* (unctuous), diet with similar qualities might aggravate *kapha*, leading to diseases of its imbalance. Hence the food should possess qualities that counter balance *kapha* to maintain the *dosha* equilibrium.

➤ Selection of food based on samskara

Samskara or processing of dietary items in order to bring changes in the attributes for better palatability or preservation is also another important factor to be considered while choosing the food. The same food stuff can be processed differently and they attain different *guna* depending upon the method of processing.

➤ Concept of virudha

Another important concept in ayurvedic dietetics is Virudha or incompatibility. Certain food items are deemed unfit to consume when consumed in combination. Eighteen types of virudha have been mentioned, when consumed for a prolonged time leads to various metabolic as well as other systemic diseases. Combination of food items can have beneficial effect also as in the case of curd when taken with green lentils.

➤ **Selection of food based on age**

Age of the individual is significant in deciding the diet because of the varying metabolic demands in different age groups and also the dosha predominance in each age group. Kapha dosha is predominant in childhood, pitta in the middle age and vata in the old age. Accordingly the diet should be tailored in each age group in such a way that the respective dosha are not vitiated, thus preventing diseases.

➤ **Timing considerations**

Time of food intake is to be fixed based on the individual needs of the person and can vary between individuals. Generally, Ayurveda advises to take food only twice a day, preferably one 26 in the morning and one in the evening. Two important factors to be considered for fixing the time of the food intake are the signs of proper digestion of previously ingested food and attainment of good hunger. Proper digestion of previous food is indicated by feeling hunger and thirst, eructation which does not have the taste of previous food, feeling lightness of abdomen and body, and proper evacuation of faeces and urine.

Conclusion

Ayurveda, a traditional system of medicine that originated over three

millennia ago offers extensive insights about food and health based on certain unique conceptual as well as theoretical positions. There has been an increased global interest in traditional medicine. Efforts to monitor and regulate traditional herbal medicine are underway. Ayurvedic concepts and practices on health, food, and nutrition are relatively different from those of biomedicine and modern nutrition. Systematic investigation can provide new insights into nutritional sciences to provide solutions in contemporary healthcare, for instance, how diet and life-style can be modulated to suit one's prakriti, age, and season. Moreover, prevention and management of lifestyle diseases like diabetes can only be achieved by tailoring the measures to meet the individual demands rather than adopting a generalized strategy.

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