

Harmony Through *Ayurveda*: A Holistic Guide to Optimal Health Through Diet and Lifestyle

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Abstract

Ayurveda is an eternal system of medicine that delineates conventional methods to treat the diseased conditions and encourage perseverance of optimal health, thus maintaining a healthy life. This objective of health maintenance can be achieved with the help of affirmative food and lifestyle alterations in harmony with the quotidian cycle and respective seasons. Ahara and vihara have pivotal role in governing the healthy state of body and mind. In the haste of chasing monetary wealth, health is often neglected leading to numerous physical and mental ailments. The world is undergoing a constant change in the way of living, owing to an intensive survival stress. At this complex juncture, in order to conquer the odds for survival, maintaining the integrity of health is very essential. This needs a more inclusive approach as mere sophisticated medical aids might not be solely efficient. As the substratum to health is subjected to a constant change under various influences, it is essential to maintain and promote health. As aptly mentioned in the texts of Ayurveda, 'Arogyam Mulamuttamam,' utmost importance should be given for the preservation and promotion of optimal health. The principal aim of Ayurveda is 'Swasthasya Swasthyarakshanam, Aturasya Vikaraprashamanam' that briefs the magnitude of health sustenance, and treating the diseased. Ayurveda has given much emphasis to taking into account an individual's physical and mental well-being along with their social and external environment while considering health promotion. This prevalence holistic approach in Ayurveda enables a healthy living and thus to optimal health. Here, the concept of conductive ahara and vihara has been described that encourages the vibrant sustenance of life.

Keywords: *Ayurveda*, health, ahara, vihara, disease

INTRODUCTION

'आयुः' means 'life' and 'वेद' means 'knowledge'; thus, *Ayurveda* is the science of life having the principle motive as 'Maintenance of positive health of an individual and treatment of the diseased' [1].

One of the prime goals of human life is to achieve the *Chaturvidha Purusharthas* namely *Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha* [2]. This, in turn, is possible only when a person is healthy.

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The word 'Health' is derived from Old English 'hal' which means 'whole' or 'a thing that is complete in itself.' According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), health is defined as 'The state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.' Various aspects such as spiritual, emotional, and vocational dimensions of health have also been proposed while defining health. The word 'Health' is the contemporary equivalent of the Sanskrit word 'Swastha' that comprises of 'Swa' meaning 'one's

own' and '*Stha*' means 'staying or being in one's own natural state.' The condition in which an individual is devoid of any abnormality or disease is said to be *Swastha*. The feeling of wellness is *Swastha*. *Swasthya* or *Aarogya* is often termed parallel to *sukha* while the *vikara* or disease as *dukha* [3]. To accomplish this state of *sukha* or *aarogya*, *dosha-dhatuamyatva* is important, which can be achieved through proper *ahara* and *vihara*.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Measures for promotion of health and prevention of diseases have been described in our *samhitas* in an elaborative way under *Dinacharya* [4], *Ritucharya* [5], *Sadvritta* [6], *Dharaniya–Adharaniya Vega* [7], *Trayopastamba* [8], and *Achara Rasayana*. Integrated personal healthcare forms the essence of *Dinacharya*, *Ritucharya*, etc. A well arrayed regimen is essentially an inseparable branch of preventing disease and promotion of health.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study included the reviews on accomplishing optimal health through food and lifestyle majorly from *Brihatrayi*, including any relevant commentary. While collecting the information from the above-mentioned materials, it is elucidated how conducive diet and lifestyle changes can lead to a healthier living.

Importance of *Ahara*

Ahara is one of the prime factors for sustenance of life. It is described as the foremost pillar among *Trayopstambha*. In the *Panchabhautika srushti*, *ahara* is made of *panchamahabhoota* that nourishes the *panchabhautika deha*. This is because the *panchabhautika* components of the ingested food nourishes the respective tissue elements of the body. As per *Taittiriya Upanishad*, *ahara* is considered as *Brahma*. As per Acharya Kashyapa, *ahara* is considered as *Mahabhaishajya*. Even Hippocrates—the father of contemporary medicine—quoted that, 'Let thy food be thy medicine and thy medicine be thy food.' *Ahara* should be chosen in accordance with one's *prakriti* that is, the constitution of an individual [9]. The quality of food, cooking method, place of eating and *ahara vidhi* (dietary regulations) plays a crucial role in providing proper nourishment of the body and mind [10]. We become what we eat. *Ahara* not only forms the body but also the diseases that occur [11]. *Hitakara* or *Pathya ahara* (wholesome diet) is conducive for maintenance of good health, longevity, strength, intellect, and complexion which helps in aliment of life and conservation of health, whereas *Apathya ahara* leads to diseased conditions.

Several lifestyle disorders and diseases occur due to faulty dietary habits that may be prevented by ensuring obedience of appropriate dietary habits. *Ahara* not only sustains life by nourishing the body, it also affects the mind. Chandogya Upanishada describes that the *sukshma bhaga* (subtle part) of food nourishes the mind. As mentioned in the Bhagwat Geeta, Adhyaya 17, *Satvik ahara*, when consumed, brings about *satva suddhi*, that leads to pleasantness and stability of mind. The same implies to *rajasika* and *tamasika ahara*, that means when consumed, leads to irritability and increased risks of disease occurrence.

Exemplars of Malignant Dietary Habits

Many of the present-day individuals initiate their day with a glass of hot water mixed with honey with a belief to strengthen and improve their digestive system and reduce the excess fat, aiding to weight loss. But consumption of honey when heated or with hot substances such as water, milk, or tea is an absolute contraindication as it leads to deleterious effect. Heating honey is considered as *samskara viruddha* in *Ayurveda*. Honey, in its natural state before heating has *madhura* and *rooksa* properties but, when heated, it undergoes biochemical transformation making it unfit for consumption. This is because when honey is heated, a chemical known as hydroxymethylfurfuraldehyde (HMF) that is linked in certain forms to toxicity and carcinogenic effects is produced. Even in preparation of *avaleha* such as *Chyawanprasha*, honey is added only after the mixture cools down.

Consumption of milk and fish is considered *viruddha* as they have opposite *veerya*. Milk has *sheeta veerya* while fish has *ushna veerya* thus, making them incompatible with each other. Consumption of milk with fish may lead to obstruction of various channels, that may cause circulatory, skin and cardiac disorders.

In consideration with digestion, the *Acharyas* have deliberately mentioned a peculiar sequence of *Rasas*, but in order to please our taste buds, we often ingest sweet dishes at the end of a meal. But that is not the correct order. Ideally, as per *Ayurveda*, *guru*, *madhura* and *snigdha ahara* that is, the food which is heavy to digest, sweet in taste and unctuous are to be ingested at first followed by *amla* and *lavana rasa* later on by *katu*, *tikta* and *kashaya rasatmak ahara*. The sanity behind this being stabilisation of the *agni (jatharagni)* by *madhura rasa* aids in proportioning of the appetite by giving the feeling of fullness. At the beginning of the meal, the *jatharagni* or the digestive power is maximum, facilitating easy digestion of *madhura ahara*, which is *guru* in nature due to predominance of *prithvi* and *jala mahabhoota*. Contrary to this, if taken at the end of the meal, *madhura rasa* by the virtue of its *gurutva*, strains the digestive power and hampers its proper functioning which slows down the physiological metabolic reactions and may eventually lead to numerous diseases including obesity, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) etc. Thus, consumption of sweet food particles at the end of the meal makes it ill for health.

Usually, curd is one of the most preferred and savoury foods consumed during any season, at any time of the day but consumption of curd should be avoided at night as it is *Kala viruddha*. As curd is *guru* and *abhishyandi*, it causes obstruction to the body channels, blocking them and leading to various diseases, hence making it incompatible for consumption at night.

Curd is ordinarily preferred during the summer season, considering it to have cooling properties. But actually, curd is hot in nature, owing to its *ushna veerya*. Because of its *guru guna* and *ushna veerya*, it increases *kapha* and *pitta doshas*, respectively [12]. Consumption of curd during *greeshma* will add on to the hotness prevailing in the atmosphere. Hence, curd should be avoided during summer.

Some food, though beneficial individually, becomes incompatible when combined with each other. Generally, all fruits when mixed with milk, become unfit for consumption. As all fruits contain varying degrees of sourness, when mixed with milk containing casein protein, they react with the acidic contents in the fruit, leading to curdling of milk. It may often lead to the formation of *ama* and may eventually cause cold, cough and allergies. Though it is fashionable these days to blend fruits into smoothies, but this combination is biologically unhealthy for consumption.

Different quantities of each food involved in a conflation can sometimes help significantly, but the same can prove to be obnoxious when combined in equal quantities. This is called as *Samyoga viruddha*. For instance, *ghee* and *madhu* (honey) are beneficial as individual substances, but *ghee* being *sheeta* and honey being *ushna*, when mixed with equal quantities by weight, is an incompatible combination.

Milk is a complete food in itself that has an innate attribute of *gurutva*, making it heavy to digest. Milk, when combined with meat which is again rich in protein and is heavy to digest may lead to indigestion, nausea, acid reflux and constipation. Food preparations such as *khichdi*, which is considered to be light and good for digestion, should not be ingested with milk. The reason behind this is the salt added to *khichdi*, which makes it incompatible to be consumed with milk. In the same manner, the practice of consuming milk with salty biscuits and bread coated with salty butter should be circumvented as it is incompatible and may lead to development of skin ailments.

One of the general household customs at our homes is making tea with milk. Tea contains flavonoids called catechins. These catechins have benefiting effects on the heart. But when milk is added to tea, the casein protein present in milk interacts with the tea, depleting the concentration of catechins, thus, decreasing its efficacy. Hence, tea and milk should be avoided together.

Consumption of stale food is another domestic practice, especially the homemakers eat leftover or stale food on a daily basis. In addition to loss of nutritive value, it may lead to gastrointestinal tract (GIT)-related disorders, including food poisoning.

In the hasty chores of life, meals are often prepared in bulk and then reheated. While reheating, the food goes through a temperature range where bacteria can multiply rapidly, increasing the risk of foodborne diseases. Taste, texture, and the nutritional quality of the food also gets affected by this.

Even, frequent usage of excess salt may menacingly hamper the bodily functions that may lead to increased risk of hypertension, heart disease and skin disorders.

Consumption of *Viruddhahara* or incompatible food either knowingly or unknowingly, in these many manners is a matter of concern as it may lead to several hazardous diseases in due course of time [13].

Another customary practice is consumption of different varieties of proprietaries under the name of *Ayurveda* without any provided prescription. This may lead to numerous ill effects that are often blamed upon *Ayurveda*. Rather, *Ayurvedic* medicines must be taken under prescribed conditions and dosages, that too for a stipulated period of time.

Commendatory Vihara

A healthy outside starts from inside. To remain healthy, it is important to pay attention to not only what you eat but also to the activities that you engage in subsequently.

For enhancing health, it is advised to take befitting rest for an appropriate time, that too in an appropriate position. For the same, *vamkukshi* has been advised by our *Acharyas*; वाम = left, कुक्षि = abdomen, stomach. *Vamkukshi* does not mean sleeping during the day but is rather a light period of relaxation, with no distractions that allows the body to get on with its physiological functions. Just after ingestion of food, there is a physiological increase in blood flow towards gastric region for enhancing the process of digestion. When we rest on the left side after having meals, stomach and its gastric juices remain lower than the oesophagus, thus reducing the chances of heartburn and digestive upsets [14]. Hence, in order to facilitate the normal metabolic functioning of the body, it is advised to take some rest after taking food.

Moreover, *Acharya* Sushruta has advised *shatpavali* that is, slow walking for about 100 steps after having meals. If one goes to bed, immediately after having meals, it increases *kapha* and *meda* in the body, which eventually leads to obesity. To avoid this, slow walking for about a hundred steps is advised after meals.

Rules regarding drinking water have also been described in our *samhitas*. Drinking water immediately after food makes a person obese. Drinking water before meals makes the digestive juices more dilute, leading to emaciation. Thus, water should be sip in the middle of meals or after every few bolus [15].

Though it is not recommended to practice *yoga* immediately after intaking food, *vajrasana* is the only *yogasana* that is to be practiced after dinning. *Vajrasana* aids to the process of digestion by enhancing blood circulation and stimulating the lower abdomen. It relieves excessive gas and pain in the stomach region and encourages spinal alignment, strengthens the nerves of legs and thighs, and makes knees and ankle joints more flexible, thereby preventing certain rheumatic diseases.

Nidra is an integral feature gifted by nature, which is essential for preservation and restoration of a healthy body and mind. But, nowadays, due to changing lifestyles, it is difficult to follow these life-promoting practices as mentioned in the *samhitas*. *Diwaswapna* that is, sleeping during daytime vitiates

kapha-pitta doshas, except in *Greeshma rutu*. This vitiation of *doshas* lead to *agnidushti* causing various diseases such as *amavata*. On the other hand, *Ratrijagrana* that is, awakening at night, leads to *vata-pittaja* disorders leading to increased roughness in the body, tiredness, headache, and constipation. *Acharya* Vagbhatt has described specific time and age in relation to the predominance of *doshas* [16]. At night, 6–10 pm is dominated by *kapha dosha* hence, it is an appropriate time for bed. If one stays awake after 10 pm onwards, then this *kala* is ruled by *pitta* and *vata doshas* subsequently, leading to *vataj* and *pittaj* disorders. This can be related to the contemporary circadian rhythm. The pineal gland is light-sensitive; when it gets dark, the pineal gland releases melatonin into our body. If the sleep cycle is irregular, it leads to disturbance in hormone production, leading to malfunctioning of bodily metabolism. For those doing night shifts, it is advised to take half of the sleep to that of night, and that too empty stomach.

Mobile phones have become an inevitable part of our daily lives in the past few decades that intervene with physiological functioning of the body, including sleep. Sleep plays an important role in mood cognitive functions. Sleep loss, sleep restriction and sleep disorders may have a negative effect on the physical and mental functioning of the body. Usage of mobile phones prior to bedtime or even immediately after waking up is a common habit among many individuals. However, this unhealthy pattern may lead to delayed bedtime, sleep loss, irregular sleep–wake patterns, poor sleep quality and increased tiredness during the day. Restricting the usage of mobile phones close to bedtime may reduce sleep latency and pre-sleep arousal. This increases the sleep duration and working memory.

In today's restless era, an ideal regimen of eating food after cleansing of the body is often being ignored. Even it is advised that one should not take a bath in the next two hours after having a meal. The *agni mahabhoota* present in the body, specifically *jatharagni*, is responsible for the digestion of food. If one bath immediately after meals, the *agni* gets diminished, leading to *ama nirmana*, *mandagni* and *tridosha prakopa*, resulting in decreased blood circulation required for effective digestion. This also means lowering blood circulation and absorption. Adequate functioning of *agni* is the invariable agent in the process of digestion and good digestion is the key to sound health.

One of the most eminent changes in dining patterns over recent times is frequent usage of phones during meals. Although it might seem harmless, this habit disrupts the physical and mental well-being. One of the most notable effects of using digital appliances while eating may lead to overeating and increased risk of obesity. In our classical texts, the process of eating is stated as *ahara yagna*. *Jatharagni* is often worshipped as it is considered as a constitute of *agni mahabhoota* and as the *agni deva*. Food offered in order to maintain the *agni* is considered a part of *yagna*. Hence, whatever is offered should be done with sincere mindedness and focusing only on food with complete consciousness. Mindful eating can combat the tendency of distracted eating and helps in recognizing the real hunger, reducing the risk of pseudo eating and emotional eating. Thus, excessive usage of mobile phones and television have a wide extent from ingestion of food until its excretion. Even the faulty practise of using cell phones in the restroom may increase risk of lifestyle disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome.

Hence healthy eating, exercise and reducing screen time have many benefits. An important vision benefit is that reducing screen time may help to slow down the progression of myopia. Certain daily exposure to natural daylight rather than the artificial screen light is critical for proper development and functioning of eyesight. Exposing to daytime sunlight assists vitamin D levels and improves psychosomatic well-being. On the contrary, lack of sunlight may disrupt body's internal clock and may lead to a feeling of depression with increased levels of stress and anxiety.

The practice of binge eating has increased nowadays. Eating while watching television can lead to overeating. People tend to eat mindlessly when they are focused on something else. This is especially true in case of consumption of pre-packaged food items. Body and mind both are interrelated and interdependent. The body follows the mind and vice versa. Thus, in holistic approach of the preservation of health and disease management, maintenance of mental health plays a vital role.

A recent trend of going to gyms in the clan of fitness has developed in the past decade. The goal of exercising is to bring about lightness in the body and improve the working capacity. It increases the digestive fire and burns excess fat present in the body. As per *Ayurveda*, *vyayama* has been included as a part of the daily regimen in order to be *swastha*, but not everyone is eligible for doing so. *Vyayama* is contraindicated for children, old aged, pregnant women and those suffering from *vata-pittaja* disorders. However, *vyayama* is to be performed only half of one's strength along with consideration of *prakriti*, *desha* and *kala*. After exercising, one should do mild massage in order to combat the increased *vata*. Over exercise may lead to emaciation, dyspnoea, and debility. One should practice it with respect to *Kala* (time) and in *samyoga* (should be proportional) and not *Hinayoga* (less or no use) or *Atiyoga* (excessive use). Exercise is beneficial for the body but doing strenuous exercise that too during *greeshma rutu* may lead to deleterious effects.

With advancing time, *vyayama* has been modified to modern times exercising that too in gyms with air conditioning facilities. In an air-conditioned room, the body does not stay warm for longer periods and tends to cool down often. The body gets rid of harmful substances through sweating, the more you sweat, the cleaner your system becomes. Coldness due to air conditioners may cause obstruction to *svedavaha srotas*, thus obstructing the excretion of *sweda* and eventually causing *stambhana* (stiffness of body). Thus, working out in an AC gym hampers the natural release of toxins and may eventually lead to muscle aches, muscle tear, and joint pain and may also lead to suffocation. Alongside focusing on correct methodologies for impact training and strength training along with efficient breathing patterns and mind relaxing exercises should be emphasized in order to make the body fit both physically and mentally.

For biological corporality and optimum functioning, every individual requires a continuous supply of food, water, and air as a basic need. In accordance with that, it is necessary to excrete the waste products that are generated continuously as a result of metabolic activities. Such biological needs that naturally prevail in every individual are termed as *vega* (*dharaneeya* and *adharaneeya vega*) or the natural urges. *Dharaneeya vega*, which includes *lobha*, *irshya*, *krodha*, *shoka*, *bhaya* etc. in general are those urges to be taken control of that is, they should be suppressed. If not, these psychological emotions or *bhavas* may lead to a number of psychosomatic disorders. It does not only harm one's personal life but also affects the social life badly. On the other hand, *adharaneeya vegas* are the ones which should never be suppressed at any cost. But in today's era, in the race of achieving success in a limited period of time, people generally suppress these natural urges, which results in various health hazards.

Every system of the body gets affected by *Vegadharana*. This can be understood as follows: When an individual suppresses natural urges such as *Purisha vega*, *Chardi vega*, *Udgara vega* and *Kasa vega*, it affects the respiratory system. Cardiovascular system is affected when *Shukra vega*, *Purisha vega*, *Adhovata vega*, *Udgara vega*, *Trushna vega*, *Kasa vega*, and *Shramaja Shwasa vega* are suppressed. Gastro-intestinal system gets affected by suppression of *Udgara vega*, *Adhovata*, *Bashpa vega*, *Shramaja Shwasa vega*, *Kshudha vega*, *Kasa vega*, and *Purisha vega*. Suppression of *Mutra vega*, *Shukra vega*, and *Adhovata vega* afflicts the urinary system. Reproductive system is affected by doing the *dharana* of *Shukra vega* and *Mutra vega*. Physiological ailments such as headache might occur due to suppression of *Mutra vega*, *Purisha vega*, and *Kshavathu vega*. Constipation may occur when *Adhovata vega*, *Udgara vega*, and *Nidra vega* are suppressed. Eye-related disorders might be caused by suppression of *Bashpa vega*, *Chardi vega*, and *Nidra vega*. Suppression of *Trushna vega* may lead to deafness. Obstruction of urine, faeces, and flatus are caused by suppression of *Adhovata vega*. Suppressing *Shramaja Shwasa vega*, *Nidra vega*, *Trushna vega*, *Kshuda vega*, and *Adhovata vega* may lead to weakness of the body. Suppression of *Kshavathu vega* leads to weakness of sensory organs. Suppressing the *chardi vega* leads to skin lesions, discolorations, and itching [17]. Avoiding the cause is the treatment of all diseases [18]. Therefore, all diseases that are caused by suppression of natural urges can be simply prevented by avoiding them.

DISCUSSION

In today's briskly way of life, we often mislead ourselves from the true essence of living, leading to a hazy body. Appropriate *ahara*, *vihara*, *vichara*, and *achara* forms basis of a healthy living. *Acharya rasayana* and *sadvritta* are also included in the regimen to be followed for betterment of physical and mental health.

CONCLUSION

Modern aged individuals find themselves more under stress than ever before. To live a happy, healthy and long life, substantial *ahara* and *vihara* should be followed. In the haste of gathering wealth and resources, the most important aspect of health is often neglected. Get up and focus on the good, do good, and make your health a priority. If you do not make time for your wellness, you will be embodied to illness.

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