

Review Article

Overview on Nutrition and Dietetics: Ayurvedic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

All living beings in the universe require food for sustenance of life. Ayurvedic concepts of *Ahara* and dietary or *pathya* guidelines are very vast, scientific, and on the basis of application. Nutrition is the science of food and diet is application of food in health and sick. Food, sleep, and expansion of mind are three subpillars or tripods (*Triopastambhas*) of life, and vividly described in classical texts. Each Ayurvedic prescription is based on *Ahara* (diet), *Vihara* (lifestyle), *Aushadhi* (medicaments). Major texts exclusively deals with balanced diet, diet in different seasons, constitution, and age group, specific diet for all eight clinical branches of Ayurveda, classification of food sources, protection of food items, right and wrong rules of eating, incompatible diet etc. for healthy living on the basis of dietetic rules. But there is immense difference of dietary applications in ancient India and in the present digital era.

Keywords: Tridosha, Ahara , Agni, Ama , Kalabhojan , Ojus prakriti

Introduction:

In the present digital age, discuss some core concepts of Ayurveda on nutrition and dietetics of vast ancient knowledge system on health and healing is still venerable. It is a old *shastra* of Indian origin on life, health, happiness and quality of life; disease and cure; based on various philosophical and scientific principles. Lots of emphasis has been given to rational thinking on this subject. Every principle has a deep insight and firm foundation, but the theory of *Tridosha* i.e. *vata* (movement or neurological function), *pitta* (transformation and metabolism

or endocrinological function) and *kapha* (growth/ immunological function) is most important one,¹ as it is the foundation of physiology, pathology, pharmacology, biochemical processes, diagnosis, diet selection and therapeutic management as per western thought. Ayurveda was part and parcel of Vedic literatures and has strong historical, cultural and traditional roots. It is the contribution of thousands of great *Rishis* through ages.

Food sustains the life of living being. Complexion, clarity of mind, good voice, longevity, understanding, happiness, satisfaction, nourishment, strength and

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intelligence are all dependent on food. Authorities of Ayurveda give maximum emphasis on digestion than nutrition, as the digestion of food by *pachakapitta* (digestive juices and local gastric juice, hormones), the principal factor in the nourishment of the body.² The living body is the product of a continuous process of digestion and metabolism (*Agni*). In fact, most of the diseases are due to disturbance of *Agni* at some level. When *Agni* is physically powerful, our body fully assimilates nutrients and eliminates what it does not need. Every classical text of Ayurveda has incorporated different explanations on food such as 12 categories of sources, according to specific actions (*prabhava*), according to mode of intake, six tastes in each meal to make it tasty, delicious, balanced and therapeutics; best and worst dietetic items, effect on *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha* and mental qualities, different processing methods of food, dietetic rules, effects of insufficient and excess food intake, food related diseases, diet suitable and to be avoided by persons of different constitutions (*Prakriti*), ideal time for meals etc.

Important dietary principles:

Life process and bodily strength directly proportional to the activity of *Agni* on ingested food through *aharapachana* (digestion), *dhatuposona* (nourishment), and *dhatuparinama* (transformation and metabolism).³ According to Ayurveda, the idea of diet selection is not to generate *aama*, a sticky, poison like substance (aa: nearer to, ma: poison) in the gastrointestinal tract and other organ systems.⁴ A coated tongue, bad breath, dullness of the senses, depression and unclear thinking indicate presence of *Ama* in the system.

According to Ayurveda, a food only be termed as diet when it fulfil five criteria: maintain bio-balance (*doshasamyam*), macro and micro channels friendly (*pathyam*), good for body constitution (*hitam*), pleasing for mind (*manasa priyam*),⁵ and produces vital

energy and tissue essence known as *Ojus*. It is the vital essence of all seven *dhatu*s from '*rasa*' to '*shukra*' and closely related to physical, mental and spiritual strength of an individual.

Balanced diet refers to the articles of diet which as a whole maintaining health and prevent disease, increase strength of the body, health span, vitality, memory etc., and consists of six components namely: energy yielding/ *jeebaniya*, structure building/ *brimhaniya*, prevent fat accumulation/ *lekhaniya*, elimination of waste products/ *bhedaniya*, repairing damaged tissues/ *sandhaniya*, and promotes digestion/ *deepaniya* according to Charaka Samhita, the principles and practice of Ayurvedic Medicine.⁶

Preventive strategies are the backbone of Ayurveda where food plays a major role because both the body and disease are product of food. Ayurvedic texts clearly pointed out that food should be taken only after completion of digestion of previous meal having four important characters, i.e, right quality of food/ *hita bhojan*, right quantity/ *mita bhojan*, in right time / *kala bhojan*, along with control of need and greed (*jitendriya*). If diet intake is correct, utility of medicine is secondary.⁷

Eight factors should be considered while deciding a diet plan of an individual to get optimum result. They are natural food of quality (*prakriti*), processing (*karana*), combination (*samyoga*), quantity (*rashi*), regional influence (*desha*), influence of time (*kala*), the rules in dietetics (*upayogasamstha*), and the person who consume (*upoyokta*).⁸ Those eight factors determining the nutritional value of food.⁹

Diet suitable to the person of different physical and mental makeup or constitution/ *prakriti* enhances the health span and disease non-susceptibility. *Prakriti* is the inherent property or *swabhabhva* of an individual and is the sum of physical,

physiological, psychological, immunological and spiritual aspects of life by which one person can be separated from other. Some have predominance of *vata* (ectomorph), some of *pitta* (mesomorph), some of *kapha* (endomorph) and others are *sama prapriti* (equilibrated)¹⁰ mentioned in the major Ayurvedic texts.

Regarding quantity of food and fluid our *shastra* clearly pointed out a formula in relation to contents of stomach, which is the reservoir of food. It can be divided in to four quadrants by self assessment. Two quadrants exclusively for solid, one quadrant for liquid food, and rest quadrant should be empty for movement of *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*¹¹ and for aiding digestion.

Avoid dietetic incompatibilities (*viruddha Aahar*), is a unique concept of Ayurveda. The food that has improper combinations or is wrongly processed is called *viruddha Aahara*, e.g. honey with hot water, fishes with milk, honey and ghee in equal quantities etc. These types of diet cause *Aama* formation, which acts as nucleus in the pathogenesis of several diseases. Acharya Charaka has described 18 factors responsible for dietetic incompatibilities.¹²

There is small difference between food (*Aahara*) and drug (*Ousadha*) in Ayurveda on the basis of pharmacodynamics (*Bhesaja vijnan*). They are taste (*rasa*), properties (*guna*), active principle (*viry*), post digestive effect (*vipaka*) and specific action (*prabhava*). Food is dominated with *rasa* and *guna* on the other hand drug is dominated with *viry*, *vipaka* and *prabhava*. A large number of medicinal formulations are nutraceuticals in nature, i.e. nutritional benefit and health benefit, e.g. *Chyavanprash* (for general health and prevention of respiratory disorders).¹³

Rules of eating: proper place and circumstances, not too fast or slow, eat with full concentration, no talking or laughing, food should be warm on digestion of previous

meal. Overuse, misuse, and abuse of foods tend to make people sensitive or allergic.¹⁴

In fact every patient, irrespective of diseases can be put on diet plan, aims at: a) nourishment (*santarpan*) of the body, b) non production of poison like material (*Aama*), and c) promotion of proper excretions in proper time (*Apatarpan*), along with, d) assessment of digestive capacity (*Agni*).¹⁵

Concept of safe food saves lives in the term of Anna – *rakshahas* have described in Ayurvedic text. The clinical features of poisoned food and drinks, methods of testing of poisoned foods, and therapeutic management particularly cardio protection for the king, explained in *Ashtanga Hridaya*.¹⁶ Food safety and nutrition are closely related.

Twelve categories of food: These include both liquid and solid food materials: Corns (*shuka dhanya*), Pulses (*shami dhanya*), Meat and fishes (*mamsa varga*), Vegetables (*shaka varga*), Fruits (*phala varga*), Greens (*harit varga*), Wines (*madya varga*), Water (*ambu varga*), milk and milk products (*goras varga*), Sugars (*ikshu varga*), Cooked food (*krittana varga*), Food adjuvant or spices (*ahara yogi varga*).¹⁷

Balanced diet in Ayurveda : It comprises of red variety of *shali* rice, green gram, rock salt, *Amlaki* fruit, milk, grass feed and grazing in sunlight cow's ghee, meat of animals of dry land and potable water. A balanced diet is indispensable for vital functions of the body, including wear and tear, an energetic lifestyle and for protection against common disease. A long list of most wholesome (*hita tama*) and unwholesome (*ahita tama*) articles of diet also mentioned in Charaka samhita.

Conclusion:

Ayurveda gives equal importance to drugs (*Aushadha dravyas*) and food substances (*Ahara dravyas*) and explained elaborately

in the texts. As per Kashyapa Samhita, *ahara* is *Mahabhaishajya*, i.e. food is a great medicament. Diet is an art and science with multiple aspects such as nutritive value, effect on various body parts, and effect on emotions, mind, and spiritual qualities. It also connected to individual choice, dietary incompatibilities, seasonal, geographic, climatic, source, disease conditions and therapy. Aims of balanced and nutritious diet that assist in formation of *Ojas*, which is responsible for physical, mental and spiritual strength, maintenance and protection of the body of an individual. Therefore, entire life of an individual depends on food. The vital breath (*prana*), positive immunity (*ojas*), and cellular energy (*tejus*) are all expressions of proper nutrition via *Agni*. But there is a great difference of dietary applications mentioned in the ancient classical Ayurvedic texts and in present digital Age. The concepts of nutrition and dietetics is a treasure trove in Ayurveda, which needs further exploration.

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