

Introduction to Ayurveda

Ayurveda is an ancient medical system from India, based on the theory that the elements of the body must be balanced in order to achieve optimal, holistic health. In essence, it is both the art of daily living in harmony with nature, and a science, defining the natural principles of health and self-healing through many fundamental components, such as nutrition, lifestyle, exercise, meditation, and cleansing.

Ayurveda is a Sanskrit word meaning “the science of life.” It is the oldest and most holistic medical system in the world, first founded in written form in the ancient *Vedas*, a collection of religious and philosophical writings. Although the *Vedas* are said to be written over 5,000 years ago, the oral tradition dates back thousands of years prior to their written emergence. *Veda* is a Sanskrit term for science, knowledge, or wisdom. *Ayus* means life. To know about life is Ayurveda.

The Five Great Elements

Understanding the Five Elements is fundamental to understanding Ayurveda. All matter is composed of Space, Air, Fire, Water, and Earth. As man is a representation of nature, each individual embodies all Five Elements, in both the physical body as well as the psychological realm. These Elements reflect the different degrees of density of all matter, and in effect, make up the doshas of living beings, known as Vata, Pitta, and Kapha.

The first of the Great Elements is Space. Also known as “Ether,” this element represents the universal, omnipresent element without form or motion. It is the distance that separates all matter. *Akasha*, the Sanskrit term for Ether, is unique in being transitional and subtle. It is associated with sound, as the vibration of pure consciousness. Hearing loss, loss of the voice, cracking joints, gastric

issues, joint pain or feelings of not being well-grounded may result with an imbalance of Ether in the body. Psychologically speaking, *Akasha* is peace and expansiveness, relating to not only love and compassion, but also anxiety and loneliness.

The next element is Air, or *Vayu*. Air comes from Ether, in the form of movement and direction. The qualities of Air include light, dry, rough, flowing, subtle, sharp, clear, cool, mobile and hard. It is associated with the sense of touch. Too much of the Air element may lead to hyper-excitability, constipation, dry skin and hair, dullness, lack of luster, or painful joint movements. An Air deficiency may lead to poor oxygen in the blood or a feeling of suffocation. Without adequate Air, blood circulation may be affected, leading to serious issues. Healthy air flow must remain constant in the body or blockages will occur and tissues will not receive adequate nutrition, hormones and other vital components necessary for optimal health. *Vayu* is associated with desire, happiness and joy. Like Space, an imbalance of Air is also linked with fear and anxiety.

When Air begins to move, it creates the friction that manifests the third element of Fire, or *Tejas*. Fire is hot, light, dry, rough, subtle, flowing, sharp, clear and soft. Fire is active and intelligent. It is associated with the sense of vision. It brings forth transformation, in the form of solids into gas or liquids, but also of food into energy. *Tejas* is directly related to a body's metabolism. Too much Fire in the body can lead to acidity, boils or other skin problems, hyperthyroidism, frustration, anger, or inflammation. Too little Fire in the body can lead to loss of appetite, constipation, slow metabolism, weight gain, accumulation of toxins in the body, or lethargic, dull thinking.

Water, or *Jala*, characterizes the change initiated by Fire, and represents the liquid state. Water is heavy, moist, cool, smooth, stable, gross, dull, flowing, soft and cloudy. The human body is 90% water and only 10% fat, protein, carbohydrates and minerals. As a result, *Jala* is of major importance in

maintaining homeostasis and proper health. If we have too much Water in the body, we may suffer from edema (swelling) or excess fluid in the organs, such as the lungs, heart or brain. If we have too little Water in the body, anemia or dehydration may occur. Dehydration can be life-threatening or have serious medical implications, such as kidney failure, seizures, heart rhythm problems, coma, shock, or heat stroke. It can also lead to less serious but hurtful side effects, such as muscle cramps, stiffness, constipation, heat cramps, heat exhaustion, low potassium, and distorted thinking and mood disorders. It is associated with the sense of taste. Water carries energy throughout the body, moving fluids and washing out wastes.

The final element is Earth, or *Prithvi*. Earth is the most solid of all the elements, representing the structure of the body. It is solidified consciousness and associated with smell. Earth is rough, gross, dense, stable, cool, dry, heavy, clear, hard and dull. If we have an excess of the Earth element, we may suffer from obesity or respiratory disorders. A deficiency of the Earth element may manifest as osteoporosis, anorexia, anemia, sensitivity to cold due to lack of body fat, being underweight or hormonal imbalances. Estrogen imbalances in women will most likely occur if Earth is deficient, because body fat is needed to store estrogen. Without adequate fat, the menstrual cycle will stop and infertility will result.

The Five Great Elements make up the doshas, the three main mental and physiological principles that make up one's constitution. Vata is made up of Space and Air, Pitta is the constitution of Fire and Water, and Water and Earth makes up Kapha. Although all three doshas are present in every being, usually there is a primary dosha, followed by a secondary. This makes up a person's constitution, or *Prakruti*. This specific combination reflects the energy pattern of a being at conception. The *Vikruti* is the altered state of the dosha, which reflects the current state of health, and sometimes a doshic imbalance in an individual. Next, we will explore the individual dosha types and their characteristics.

Vata Dosha

Perhaps the most complex dosha, the Vata constitution is made up of Air and Space. This dosha literally means "wind". They tend to be thin, have small faces and eyes, dry, dull skin and hair, poor long-term memory and are very social. Their appetite and thirst is variable, as is their digestion. Although they are attracted to raw vegetables, this can aggravate their dosha and lead to ungroundedness, a common issue for an out-of-balance Vata. They tend to eat very little, further contributing to their imbalance. They sleep less than the other doshas, and can become easily exhausted. Despite lack of sleep, they often wake up refreshed and ready to go. Vatas can be very joyful and loving, and are great thinkers. On the other side, Vatas tend to worry and exhibit feelings of fear and anxiety. People who are Vatta have qualities of dry, light, cold, rough, subtle, mobile, clear and astringent. Generally speaking, Vatas should stay warm, eat warm foods, keep a routine, and avoid cold foods and temperatures.

Pitta Dosha

The Pitta dosha holds a consistent medium build, with bright eyes and rosy skin tones. They tend to feel warm and sweat a lot, whereas the other doshas tend to be cold. This heat within the Pitta type is the foundation of their constitution, which is made up of Fire and Water. An out-of-balance Pitta may crave hot and spicy foods, although it is not good for them. When Pittas become hungry, they must eat right away, or else they will become irritable. Their sleep is sound and of medium duration. The physical ailments associated with Pitta are related to too much heat in the body. Inflammation, rashes, and fevers are some examples. Pittas are bright and sharp, with good memories and are great problem solvers. They can also be controlling, jealous, and aggressive. Their attributes include hot, sharp, light,

oily, liquid, spreading, sour, bitter, and pungent. Pittas should eat cooling foods and drinks, and avoid heat, oils, and spicy foods.

Kapha Dosh

Kaphas are made up Earth and Water, and are the most structured of the three doshas. They have large, sturdy builds, with dark, shiny eyes and healthy skin. Their hair is often thick, dark and soft. The Kapha appetite is steady, yet they exhibit slow metabolism and digestion. If a Kapha type is aggravated for extended periods of time, they can become overweight easily. They have a hard time getting up in the morning and tend to sleep for prolonged periods. Regular exercise is important for Kaphas to maintain health, although they prefer not to. They are very loving, nurturing types, soft and compassionate. They have excellent long-term memories. Their attributes consist of heavy, slow, cool, oily, damp, smooth, dense, soft, static, viscous, and cloudy. To keep in balance, Kaphas need to exercise regularly, eat light and dry food, keep active, and avoid dairy and heavy foods.

The Six Tastes

In Ayurveda, one of the most important ways to balance the doshas is through taste. Through taste, the doshas are quickly balanced or aggravated. One cannot merely take medicinal herbs in encapsulated forms and receive the same benefits as when acquired through tasting the herbs before ingestion. Just as the doshas are made of the Five Elements, so are The Six Tastes. The Six Tastes are Sweet, Sour, Salty, Pungent, Bitter, and Astringent. The correlation between the doshas and the tastes within the Elements are as follows:

“Vata in the body is increased by foods that have any of the following tastes: Bitter, Astringent, or

Pungent. This is due to the predominance of the Air Element in these three tastes. The Secondary Elements in these tastes are Ether in Bitter taste, Earth in Astringent taste, and Fire in Pungent taste.

Pitta is increased by foods that have any of the following tastes: Sour, Pungent, and Salty. Each of these tastes has Fire as its primary Element. The secondary Elements for these tastes are Earth for Sour, Air for Pungent, and Water for Salty.

Kapha has substantial amounts of Water as well as the Earth Element. The three tastes that increase Kapha with their associated Elements, respectively, are sweet with Earth and Water, Salty with Water and Fire, and Sour with Earth and Fire.

The tastes that decrease the levels of the doshas in the body are the following: Salty, Sour, and Sweet tastes decrease Vata; Bitter, Astringent, and Sweet decrease Pitta; Pungent Bitter and Astringent tastes decrease Kapha” (Ninnivaggi, 162).

It is important to understand The Six Tastes in order to design a doshic diet for optimal health. First, you must determine your *Prakruti* and *Vakruti* to determine what foods are most balancing for your constitution. Please use the attached charts to determine your constitutional assessment.

Whereas the assessment is a great place to begin in determining your constitution, there are additional cues to check. Pulse reading has been a form of Ayurvedic diagnosis since the beginning. The index finger is placed below the radial styloid, or the protruding wrist bone below the thumb. Following the index finger is the middle and ring finger. The pulse is read according to its characteristics, location, rate, rhythm, force, tension and volume, temperature, and the qualities of the vessel wall. Through these interpretations, a practitioner can fully determine one's constitution. For

example, a Vata pulse is fast, feeble, and light. A Pitta pulse is strong, hot, and forceful, and a Kapha pulse is deep, slow, and thick.

Balancing the Doshas

In Ayurveda, health is the balance among body, mind, and consciousness. Once you have determined what your primary dosha is, and may have identified an imbalance, it is time to take steps to correct it and improve your holistic health. There are foods, activities, pranayama and specific types of yoga known to correct every issue. There are two fundamental principles in Ayurveda in regards to healing: Like increases like, and opposites decrease each other.

Pranayama

Pranayama is *prana*, or breath, plus *ayam*, which means “to control.” Controlling one’s breath is to control one’s mind. In Ayurveda, the brain is divided into male and female energy. The left brain represents male energies and the right is associated with female energy. *Pranayama* balances the male and female energies in our nervous system. When *Pranayama* is performed, the subtle channels are purified, and the mind is clear and under control, giving us the capability to exhibit passive awareness. There are many breathing techniques in *Pranayama*. These are a few examples of the most common practices.

In *Alternate Nostril Pranayama*, while sitting comfortably, close the right nostril with your right thumb and inhale deeply into the belly. Hold your breath for a moment, and exhale through your right nostril while closing the left with the ring and little finger of your right hand. Repeat this process, with opposite hands and nostrils for five to ten minutes.

Sitkari Pranayama, or cooling breath, is performed by curling your tongue into a tube and breathing deeply. This has a cooling effect throughout the body, and is great for pacifying an aggravated Pitta. Another form of this is known as teeth hissing, where one hisses while breathing through the teeth, cooling the body. This works well for those who cannot curl the tongue.

Bhastrika Pranayama is also known as “Breath of Fire.” This practice involves rhythmic breathing with equal emphasis on both the inhale and the exhale. Breath of Fire heats the body and strengthens the lungs, relieving allergies and asthmatic issues.

Bee Breath, or *Bhramari Pranayama*, vibrates the nervous system. This form or sound therapy calms the mind and reduces stress while healing throat ailments. Through constricting the epiglottis, one creates a high pitched tone while inhaling and a humming sound through exhalation. The exhalation is similar to the chanting of *Om*.

Pranayama is beneficial for everyone, but it should be noted that it is best learned under the supervision of a yoga teacher.

Balancing Vata

A Vata imbalance is characterized by anxiety, impulsiveness, insomnia, weight loss, constipation, dry throat and eyes, rough skin, insecurity, and spaciness. To balance an aggravated Vata, he or she should avoid raw vegetables and favor cooked ones, except for most nightshades and brassicas. Sweet fruits fare better than dry ones, such as bananas, avocados, figs, peaches and plums. Cooked grains such as rice, oats and wheat are balancing, as is dairy and meats such as poultry and fish

in moderation. Vatas benefit from consuming all oils, especially heavier ones, such as sesame and almond. All sweeteners and spices are also good for the Vata dosha.

Vatas benefit greatly from routine. Being prone to excess mobility, they tend to become ungrounded and restless. Regular meditation and *Pranayama* both serve as grounding components to soothe an aggravated Vata. A consistent yoga practice that involves postures centered on strength and grounding will help to correct and prevent muscle and bone conditions, and will provide relief from coldness and dryness. Vatas should enter into an asana practice slowly and always warm up. Helpful asanas for Vata dosha will focus on the pelvis and colon areas.

Here are some Vata-balancing postures (suggestions taken directly from planetwell.com):

- All sitting postures, especially Lotus pose, Diamond pose, Tortoise, and Lion pose
- All spinal twists, especially lying twists, for they remove Vata from the nervous system
- All forward bends, especially head to knee and full forward bend, combined with backbends
- All backbends, especially Cobra and Locust, for they massage the colon and create flexibility while warming the body
- All standing postures, especially Tree pose, Triangle pose, and the Warrior series, for they emphasize strength, stability, and balance.
- Sun Salutations to warm the body and focus the mind
- Corpse pose for relaxation

Balancing Pitta

A Pitta-imbalance is related to too much heat in the body. Rashes, hives, excessive hunger,

inflammatory diseases, burning eyes or rectum, fevers, acid reflux and colitis are all manifestations of a Pitta imbalance. A Pitta dosha should avoid spicy foods, like cayenne or garlic, favoring spices like the mint family, turmeric, cardamom, coriander and cumin. Sweet fruits cool the body and sour fruits should also be avoided. Sweet and bitter vegetables, such as raw, leafy greens, cucumber, mushrooms, and squashes are good for Pitta as well, and he or she should avoid pungent vegetables, like radishes, raw onions, peppers and tomatoes. Cooked grains are beneficial, such as rice and oats, and most legumes can also be consumed. Pittas do well with mild, unsalted dairy, but should avoid sour dairy products like sour cream, hard cheese and pre-made yogurt. Pittas with healthy intestinal tracts can handle meats such as chicken, freshwater fish, buffalo and venison, but should avoid other red meats, salt-water fish, and pork. Light oils such as sunflower and olive oil are good, but the heavier oils like sesame and corn should be avoided.

Summer is the season of Pitta, and can be especially challenging for those with this particular constitution. To decrease heat in one's body, one can practice cooling *Pranayama*, such as *Sitkari Pranayama*. Yoga for Pittas is cooling, nurturing, and restorative. Pittas should avoid hot yoga practices, such as Vinyasa-flows. Pitta-focused postures focus on the small intestine and the liver, where Pitta accumulates.

Here are some Pitta-balancing postures (suggestions taken directly from planetwell.com):

- Inversions, especially Shoulder stand and Plow, but not Headstand. They reverse energy from the navel to the soft palate, which has a cooling and moistening effect on the body.
- Seated spinal twists, especially *Matyendrasana*, have a cooling effect while massaging the small intestine and liver
- Gentle backbends, especially Bow pose, Cobra pose, Boat pose, and Fish pose, have the same

massaging effects

- Forward bends, especially Tortoise, Seated Forward Fold, and Seated Angle, are grounding and bring energy to the abdomen
- Standing poses, such as Tree pose, Triangle, and Half Moon, that focus the mind without being too difficult to maintain
- Moon Salutations
- Headstands can be beneficial, but must be accompanied with cooling postures
- Corpse pose should be used to cool down in every yoga practice

Balancing Kapha

A Kapha-imbalance is often characterized by weight gain, obesity, depression, congestion, fatigue, grief, and attachment. The best way to avoid a Kapha imbalance is to stay active. Regular, vigorous exercise is vital to a Kapha constitution. Food choices also play a major role in obtaining optimal health. Although Kaphas tend to crave oily, fatty foods and sweets, they fare better with light and dry foods. Astringent fruits, such as berries, apples, and pomegranates are favored against avocado, bananas, and watermelon. Pungent and Bitter vegetables such as artichoke, brassicas, radishes, and leafy greens are better than sweet ones, like cucumber, sweet potatoes, and zucchini. Dry grains, like granola, couscous, corn and cereal, fare better than bread with yeast, brown rice or wheat. Kaphas should avoid most dairy, with exception to goat dairy and ghee. Meats such as chicken and freshwater fish are beneficial and salty meats like seafood and pork should also be avoided. Kaphas do well with heat-producing foods such as chilies and garlic, but should avoid pickled foods. Light oils like sunflower and corn are best suited for the Kapha dosha.

Along with exercise, heat-inducing *Pranayama* like Breath of Fire greatly benefit a Kapha imbalance. Yoga should be incorporated into daily exercise. The proper yoga practice for Kapha individuals should stimulate and energize the body and mind. They will increase metabolism while decreasing mucous in the membranes, a common symptom of a Kapha imbalance. It is important for Kaphas to practice postures that target the chest area, breathe deeply, and take care not to over-stress their bodies in trying to assume poses that are too difficult for their physiques.

Here are some Kapha-balancing postures (suggestions taken directly from planetwell.com):

- Standing postures, especially Warrior and Half Moon are strength-building and are great within Vinyasas
- Backbends that open the chest, such as Plow, Camel, Locust and Bow reduce congestion and inertia, while increasing metabolism
- Full inverted balancing postures, especially Handstand and Peacock Feather pose, increase energy
- Shoulder-stand stimulates the thyroid and also increases metabolism
- Sun Salutations are beneficial, and should be incorporated into a Vinyasa practice
- Corpse pose is good for relaxation and is good in any yoga practice

This is a very basic introduction into Ayurveda. Simply knowing your constitution is a big step to knowing yourself better, and is a step closer to achieving optimal, holistic health. Self-awareness is the foundation of life, and being able to anticipate your imbalances helps you to prevent illness and disease. This information can also help you to understand others, their mannerisms and habits. With such clarity, compassion is born. Achieving mental, physical, and spiritual balance is a life-long journey, one

that never stays the same, for any individual. Diet and lifestyle are the primary key components to life-long health and overall wellness.

References

Kai, Jai. (January 30, 2012). *Yoga for Vata Dosha*. Retrieved from planetwell.com/yoga-for-vata-dosha/

Kai, Jai. (February 2, 2012). *Yoga for Pitta Dosha*. Retrieved from planetwell.com/yoga-for-pitta-dosha/

Kai, Jai. (February 7, 2012). *Yoga for Kapha Dosha*. Retrieved from planetwell.com/yoga-for-kapha-dosha/

Lad, Vasant, B.A.M.S., M.A.Sc. (1998). *The Complete Book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies*. New York: Harmony Books.

Ninivaggi, Frank John, M.D. (2008). *Ayurveda: A Comprehensive Guide to Traditional Indian Medicine of the West*. United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.