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Features

Understanding Ayurveda by Neil Patel

What does Ayurveda mean?

"Ayurveda" means the science of life. Its origins can be traced back over five thousand years to the Atharva Veda, whose main patron was a God called Dhanvantari. The most significant revision of the old Ayurvedic texts came between the 8th and 10th century. This book was called the Charaka Samhita; accompanying it was an equally important text called the Sushruta Samhita – a surgical text.



Ayurveda, Yogic philosophy and Magnetic poles

Ayurveda is based upon the same school of thought as yoga – the Sankhya Philosophy, which states that creation comes into being through a spiritual process, which involves the meeting of Purusha (the soul) and Maya (cosmic delusion). This meeting creates Chitta (The heart centre and feeling), Ahamkara (The ego), Manas (The mind), and Buddhi (The intelligence). At this point three Gunas (Magnetic poles) are also created – a positive pole called Sattwa, a neutral pole called Rajas, and a negative pole called Tamas. The Sattwic pole creates thought and intelligence, and the five senses. The Rajasic pole accommodates Prana (Life force), and expresses itself through the five forces of action – communication, manipulation, locomotion, procreation, and excretion. Finally, the Tamasic pole creates the objects of the sense – which, in turn create the five elements.

The creation of the three energies

Our bodies are composed of the five elements, which have been combined in sixteen ways to create blood, muscle, bone etc. The elements also reside in the being in subtle quintessential forms. These forms are Prana (Life force), Tejas (Subtle fire), and Ojas (Creative Essence). Prana is the life force, holding mind, body, and soul together, and governing the entire being. Tejas is the subtle fire causing the transformations necessary to sustain life and transpose energies. Finally, Ojas is the pliable glue, which integrates mind, body, and soul together.



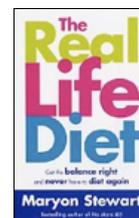
Vata, Pitta, and Kapha - Doshas

These three subtle energies manifest at a grosser level in the body to satisfy all the body's requirements. Prana manifests as Vata – which comprises ether and air; Tejas manifests as Pitta – which comprises fire and water; and Ojas manifests as Kapha – which comprises water and earth. These grosser manifestations are known as Doshas (faults- things which are prone to error)

Principle of doshas

Vata, Pitta, and Kapha govern movement, transformation, and stability respectively. Each dosha produces physical representations of itself in the body like mucus, bile etc. Health is governed by the adequate creation of these representations. Any imbalance in their creation results in illness. Ayurveda is based on the theory that like increases like, e.g. substances composed of earth and water, which are heavy, sticky, wet, and dense, like ice cream, increase Kapha. The opposite also works to reduce Doshas e.g. substances, which are hot and light, like black pepper, reduce Kapha, the mucus supplier of the body. What food you require depends on your body's requirements. Any one substance can nourish, heal, or poison, depending on the individual consuming it.

Dosha attributes



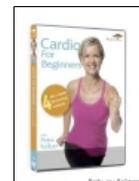
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Each dosha has its own set of attributes. Vata is dry, cold, light, unstable, clear, rough, and subtle. Pitta is slightly oily, hot, intense, light, fluid, scented, and mobile; and Kapha is oily, cold, heavy, stable, smooth, and soft. Food, which concerns human being the most in this day and age, influences the body thrice – Taste, digestive quality, and post digestive effect.

The six tastes

Six tastes exist in Ayurveda: sweet, sour, salty, pungent, bitter, and astringent. Sweet, sour, and salty tastes increase Kapha and decrease Vata; while pungent, bitter, and astringent tastes decrease Kapha and increase Vata. Sweet, bitter, and astringent tastes relieve Pitta, while sour, salty, and pungent tastes increase it. Each taste is composed of two elements e.g. salt = fire and water, pungent (chilli/ cloves) = fire and air. Sour, salty, and pungent tastes increase heat in the body, while sweet, bitter, and astringent substances are cooling. Post digestively, sweet increases tissues (Kapha), sour may burn away the tissues (Pitta), and pungent dries out the tissues (Vata).

Where the three doshas reside

The three doshas inhabit the body in the areas they are required. Vata is required below the navel to pump blood, lymph, and gases around the body, whilst Kapha resides above the diaphragm to stop Vata from pushing up too strongly. It also provides lubrication for the lungs, heart etc. Pitta resides between navel and chest and mediates between the two other doshas. Certain organs accumulate more of one dosha. Vata is in the brain, nervous system, heart, large intestine, bones, lungs, bladder, pelvis, thighs, ears, and skin. Pitta is in the brain, liver, spleen, gallbladder, small intestine, endocrine glands, skin, eyes, blood, and sweat. Kapha resides in the brain, joints, mouth, head, neck, stomach, lymph, chest, kidneys, and fat.

The five pranas

The three doshas each have five aspects, of which Vata has the most significant actions. Vata firstly manifest as Prana extending from the diaphragm to the throat. It is concerned with the intake of external nourishment. As Udana, Vata extends from the throat to the top of the head, and control expression, enthusiasm, memory, vitality, complexion etc. Apana extends from the navel to the anus controlling the expulsion of urine, faeces, gas, semen, menstrual blood, and babies. Vyana is centred in the heart and circulates nourishment, blood, lymph etc. Samana is situated in-between the navel and the diaphragm governing digestion and elimination.

The seven dhatus

The doshas utilise the body's ingredients to produce seven Dhatus, or tissues. The first of these is sap (Rasa), which is the foundation, the first juice absorbed from food. Then it is blood (Rakta), flesh (Mamsa), fat (Medas), bone (Asthi), marrow (Majja), and reproductive tissue (Shukra). Each tissue is formed from the previous.

The fourteen srotamsis

The body has fourteen main channels (Srotamsis) through which nutrients, waste products etc pass. Three are nutrition channels, the Prana channel – dealing with respiration and circulation, the water channel – extending from the palate to the pancreas, and the food channel – extending from the oesophagus to the large intestine. Seven of these channels deal with tissue nutrition. Sap through the heart, blood through the liver, flesh through the skin and muscle, fat through the kidneys, bones through the fat, marrow through the bone, the joints etc, reproductive tissue through genitalia. Three more channels deal with elimination, urine through bladder and kidneys, faecal matter through the colon and rectum, and sweat through fat and hair follicles. The fourteenth channel is the all-pervading mind channel. Females have two extra channels for milk and menstruation. Four things can disturb these channels causing illness: in/de/crease in flow, obstruction, and deviation into abnormal places. Any disturbance in flow will affect Vata.

When disturbances occur

Disturbances arise through restraining of thirteen recognised urges these are the desire to urinate, pass flatulence or faecal matter, to vomit, sneeze, belch, yawn, eat (when hungry), drink (when thirsty), cry (when sad), sleep (when tired), pant (when exhausted), and ejaculate (when over aroused). Other non-physical urges also disturb Vata including the indulgence in greed, sorrow, fear, anger, envy, pride, shame, disgust, jealousy etc.

Prakriti and Vikriti – a person's nature

Each person is born with a natural bias towards the doshas. Parental genes determine this, as well as parental mental and emotional states experienced by the foetus from conception through to birth. A person's inherent natural bias is their Prakriti, and their current doshic state is their Vikriti. Of these, there are seven types: Vata, Pitta, Kapha, V-K, V-P, P-K, and V-P-K. Mental, emotional, and physical characteristics exist within the doshas. Vatas are narrow, light, cold, dry, of variable appetite, often constipated, requiring of warmth, poor sleepers, talkative, fearful, artistic, spiritual, quick, nervous, and unsettled. Pittas are of medium frame and build, warm skinned, sweaty, oily haired or balding, intensely hungry, regular or loose bowel, competitive, early risers, angry, visual, brave, passionate, and active. Kaphas are broad or large built, heavy, cool skinned, thick haired, regular bowel movements, lazy, sleepy, cautious, peaceful, forgiving, steady, calm, emotional, and greedy.

Diseases in Ayurveda

Disease is caused by internal breakdown, external attack, or the mind. The Doshas predominate at certain periods, like the seasons, and their interchanging is said to cause disease e.g. from winter to spring – Kapha aggravation; spring to summer – Pitta inflammation; and summer to autumn – Vata disturbances. After eating Kapha dominates, during digestion Pitta, and during assimilation Vata dominates. During youth, adulthood, and old age, Kapha, Pitta, and Vata dominate again in the same order. During the morning and evening Kapha dominates, during the afternoon and midnight Pitta dominates, and during late afternoon and early morning Vata dominates. Transgressions against the mind, or doshas cause disease. Diseases are either wet or dry. Over-nourishment causes dampness of the digestive fire, and under-nourishment dries the body out. Both weaken the digestive fire leading to Ama, the accumulation in the body of partially digested foods, which clogs up the systems channels.

Significance of a vata disturbance

When Vata meets an obstruction in the channels, it angers and tries to find another route – dragging Pitta and Kapha along with it until it finds a weak point, where it then release the excess doshas – causing a specific type of disease. When Vata increases under dry conditions, it causes disease directly related to Vata. Vata is the moving force and thus, is responsible for the misplacement of all the doshas. If the doshas are not adequately organised in the digestive system and toxin occurs, they enter the six tissues, if they are still not alleviated, they enter the organs causing deep-rooted illness.

Ayurvedic diagnosis

In Ayurvedic diagnosis, positive signs are first looked for i.e. bright complexion, good flesh and fat, solid bones, strong nervous system, and eyes full of lustre. This indicates the tissues are well nourished. Then questions on bowel movements, urine, and an examination of pulse, tongue, and face follow. Excess of Kapha causes mucus, indigestion, lethargy, cough, and nausea. Insufficient Kapha leads to weakness, dryness of skin and mouth, body aches, palpitations, and insomnia. Too much Pitta causes excess bile, creating anger, acidity, body heat, burning sensations, yellowness, lack of sleep, and excessive hunger and thirst. Insufficient Pitta accounts for coldness, a lack of vigour and joy, stiffness, and weakened digestion. Excess Vata promotes weakness, emaciation, dryness, flatulence, constipation, pain, insomnia, tremors, giddiness, and impairment of sensory and motor functions; and decreased Vata causes reduced metabolism and disturbed digestion.

Pulse reading in Ayurveda

Pulse reading is traditionally taken at the right wrist of a man, and the left of a woman. The index finger reads Vata, the middle, Pitta, and the ring, Kapha. Each pulse reader has developed his or her own way of reading pulse. Some divide the five sub-divisions of the doshas into each finger, others read the warmth, thickness, and speed of the pulse, and others see the length of the body in the pulse. Vata's pulse is thin and snake-like, Pitta's is like a frog, medium, and warm, and Kapha's pulse is slow like a swan, thick, and broad. The tongues tip represent the throat, the root represents the perineum, and the body maps out the human body. Examination of faecal matter consists of looking for undigested food, viewing the consistency, colour, and sensing the odour. The colour, temperature, and froth indicate which dosha predominates in urine.

Treatment of a disease

Treatment of disease exists for the soul, mind, and body. Meditation is for the soul, mind control for the consciousness, and diet, activity, purification, and palliation for the body. Accumulated doshas are treated with diet and activity, when they aggravated they are treated with opposites. If doshas leave their reservoir, they should be removed or

neutralised with medicine. Diet is often the cause of disease so is often the most important treatment in Ayurveda. When digestive toxins are present in the system a short fast is often recommended before purification. Then the doshas are excreted through five means – Panchakarma. Emesis (Vomiting), purgation, enema, nasal medication, and bloodletting. Emesis is used to remove Kapha from chest and stomach. Enema is used for Vata to help bring it downwards. Purgation and blood letting are for Pitta, because it accumulates in the digestive tract and in the blood with its heat. Emesis is used for Pitta if it is going upward causing heartburn etc. Palliation is when medicine is digested to digest toxin and increase fire, appropriate food and drink is given, and exercise, sunbathing, and fresh air are recommended.

Medications are prepared from various sources in pills, powders, jams, wines, milks, ghees, and oils. Each dosha requires a specific strategy; Vata requires heat and oil to counteract its cold dry nature. Salt works well because it is heating and laxative. Massage with oil is good for Vata. Pitta needs cooling. Bitter and sweet taste does this best. Sandalwood, rose, and lotus help, as do pearl, cool showers, white clothes, and meditation. Pitta requires an absorbing outlet like art etc - as well as cooling raw food. Kapha requires exercise and action to destroy its lethargic nature. Pungent, fiery food works well to break down mucus as do bitter foods. All things should be hot and stimulating for Kapha – nights without sleep, sexual intercourse, wrestling, and running, anything to cause sweat. Fasting, smoking, and hot baths all decrease Kapha.

Treatment consists of remedy, vehicle, and diet. The vehicle helps the remedy by aiding digestion and absorption. Hot water is good, but ghee, honey, oil, jams, and wines are used. Some medicines are combined for effect. Kapha works well with powdered medications, Pitta with ghees, and Vata with oils. Minerals need to be burnt to ashes with herbs in order to be humanised. The more times they are burnt, the more potent they become. After purification and palliation Rasayanas are given which rejuvenate and tonify the body. There are also vitalisation techniques in Ayurveda, which aid in fertility.

This **featured editorial** has been lovingly provided to Body in Balance by [Neil Patel](#).

Neil is available for workshops and consultations on diet therapy ... for more information visit www.chikri.com or [email him](#) directly.