

The Six Tastes in Ayurveda

Ayurveda recognizes the critical importance of what we put into our bodies. In fact, it is not just food that is considered in the nutritional discussion within an Ayurvedic construct. Many imbalances can be completely reversed by just working on routines and the concept of the Six Tastes and digestion.

Overview of basic nutrition concepts in Ayurveda.

Firstly, Ayurveda looks at the concept of nutrition from a wholistic perspective and not from a separate silo perspective.

Ayurveda says that we eat to take in vital life force - energy which enables us to live. Most times in a non-Ayurvedic perspective aspects such as habit, body image, emotions and personal preference take the forefront of why people eat.

The nutritional elements that are considered in conventional nutrition are generally calories and fat, protein and carbohydrates. Ayurveda takes a completely different approach and considers the energetics of the food derived from the 5 elements as being the building blocks which nourish our tissues (Dhatu) and thereby our entire system. Along with this concept is how the elements found in foods balance the diet of each individual as understood from his/her basic mind-body constitution. Whereas, in conventional nutrition it is the caloric value which is most often considered.

So, it follows that conventional nutritional recommendations depend on the food groups and the calories associated with them. However, in Ayurveda the dietary recommendations are dependent on the 'taste' of the food and how these elements of taste affect the different mind-body constitutions (Doshas).

I'm sure you've heard the slogan in conventional nutritional wisdom: You are what you eat. Ayurveda takes this to a whole other level: You are what you digest.

It's interesting to note here that as more research is being done in conventional nutrition and Western medical science, digestion is now beginning to play a much larger role in these methods as well as regards maintaining and restoring health to the body.

Another interesting aspect of digestion within the Ayurvedic perspective is that there is more than just food that we intake which nourishes our bodies and minds.

Along with food and water, we also take in breath, emotions and information through our sense organs. All of which play significant roles in our health to which some of you may well be able to attest. This concept in Ayurveda is called Ahara.

The Six Tastes, their Qualities and some Examples.

Sweet (Madhura): According to Ayurveda this taste strengthens the channels of the body and is nourishing to both the body and the senses. It also stimulates saliva and is thought to improve circulation thereby also strengthens the heart. It also acts as a demulcent, expectorant and a mild laxative. It relieves thirst, heartburn and helps women with milk production.

Examples of Sweet Taste:

Complex carbohydrates, sweet fruits, grains, root vegetables- like potatoes and beets. Sugar, honey, milk, cheeses, oils and meats – generally meat is not eaten in great quantities, but often goat's meat is included several times per month.

Sour (Amla): This Taste stimulates acid secretions, helps with digestion, reduces gas, increases circulation and works as an anticoagulant. It is also thought to sharpen the senses.

Examples of Sour

Yogurt, limes and other sour fruits, alcohol, vinegar and cheese.

Salty (Lavana)

According to Ayurveda this Taste strengthens Agni (known as Deepana) and improves digestion (known as Pachana). The salty Taste also maintains the electrolyte balance in the

body. It can also act as a laxative and a sedative. It reduces stiffness, hardness and removes blockages in the body. It is calming to the nerves (and thereby the Vata Dosha) and relieves spasms. Salt baths remove toxins from the body, make the channels (Dhatus) flabby due to water retention, while it increases thirst and salivation.

Examples of Salty

All salts: Rock, sea, gypsum and black salts. It is worth noting here that large quantities of this taste are not needed to obtain the desired effects on the mind and the body and in fact if too much is eaten then negative connotations will occur which may include issues with the blood.

Pungent (Katu)

Pungent Tastes in Ayurveda improve metabolism and are also associated with improved metabolism is Pungent Taste's help with digestion and absorption of nutrients. It also reduces congestion, improves circulation, relieves pain and muscle tension. Pungent Taste, like Sour Taste works as an anticoagulant. It also cleanses the mouth and raises body temperature, which will promote sweating. It is effective at drying wounds and reduces excess fluids from the body,

Examples of Pungent

Jalapenos, ginger, black pepper, pippali (Indian long pepper – a very famous and well-used Indian spice), cloves, cayenne pepper, garlic and wasabi (horse radish).

Astringent (Kashaya): Constricts the blood vessels, stops bleeding and flow and promotes healing. It acts as an antidiuretic, antibiotic, antibacterial and hemostatic (helps stop bleeding) and is constipating and drying to the system. It also improves skin texture.

Examples of Astringent

Alum - the peel of a fruit (generally used by Ayurvedic doctors only), unripe banana, pomegranate peel, turmeric, golden seal, leafy green vegetables, blueberries, cranberries and beans.

Bitter (Tikta): Purifies the blood and detoxifies the body. It also works as an antibiotic, antiseptic, antihelmentic (used to destroy parasitic worms), and antipyretic (used to reduce a fever). It absorbs excess fat, oiliness, and fluids. It also opens up the channels (Srotas) while reducing body temperature. Bitter Taste works well as a liver tonic.

Examples of Bitter

Leafy vegetables, Neem (Indian lilac), aloe, golden seal, fenugreek, black tea, myrrh and bitter melon.

(Please note: no manufactured foods are considered appropriate food in the Ayurvedic perspective as they are chemically enhanced and in the Ayurvedic mindset will not have Prana (life force). Without Prana the food won't be able to nourish the body or the mind. So, for the concept of The Six Tastes any foods manufactured in a factory are not included and of course not suggested either.)

The Six Tastes and Doshas

The six tastes are related to the elements of the universe and as such have specific effects on the body; depending on a person's body constitution the six tastes will increase or decrease a specific constitution. Foods with different tastes therefore can help balance a person's body constitution, which is the goal – to balance the elements in the body to allow for balance within all systems of the body thereby having a healthy, mind-body balance.

Sweet: composed mainly of the elements of earth and water, foods with a predominately sweet taste will increase the Kapha qualities in the body and reduce the Pitta and Vata qualities in the body.

Sour: composed mainly of the elements of earth and fire, foods with a predominately sour taste will increase the Kapha and Pitta elements in the body, but reduce the Vata qualities in the body.

Salty: composed mainly of the elements of water and fire, foods with a predominately salty taste will increase the Kapha and Pitta elements in the body, but reduce the Vata qualities in the body.

Pungent: composed mainly of the elements of fire and air, foods with a predominately pungent taste will increase Pitta and Vata elements in the body, but reduce the Kapha qualities in the body.

Bitter: composed mainly of the elements of air and space, foods with a predominately bitter taste will increase Vata elements in the body, but reduces the Pitta and Kapha qualities in the body.

Astringent: composed mainly of the elements of air and earth, foods with a predominately astringent taste will increase Vata, but reduce Pitta and Kapha – even though there is some earth quality in the astringent taste it isn't enough to aggravate Kapha - qualities in the body.

| TASTE | KAPHA | PITTA | VATA |
|------------|-------|-------|------|
| SWEET | ↑ | ↓ | ↓ |
| SOUR | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ |
| SALTY | ↑ | ↑ | ↓ |
| PUNGENT | ↓ | ↑ | ↑ |
| ASTRINGENT | ↓ | ↓ | ↑ |
| BITTER | ↓ | ↓ | ↑ |

Ayurveda suggests including all six tastes at every meal, and if there are specific body constitution imbalances, specific foods will be recommended to assist with balancing the constitutional elements within the body.

Seasonal Routines as regards what foods work best for your Dosha.

As you can see from the above descriptions, it's fairly easy to avoid the foods that can create an imbalance in your body because of your Dosha when you understand which tastes aggravate the Dosha.

As such, if you are a Vata Dosha and the seasons are changing from summer to autumn (fall) then tastes such as astringent, bitter and pungent would be best avoided for the Vata Dosha at this time of year. Why, because these tastes increase the air and ether in the body and these qualities are already increasing in the environment as a result of the season.

However, if you are Pitta and Kapha Doshas then you are fine with astringent and bitter tastes as they reduce your qualities and because your body constitutions do not mirror the season's elemental qualities you will not be adversely affected by foods that have these taste qualities.

The same applies to the tastes that aggravate Pitta Doshas in summer and Kapha Doshas in the late Winter and Spring times.

Any of the tastes that aggravate a Dosha and are specific to the season will thereby aggravate the Dosha associated with it and are best avoided by that Dosha at that time.

The Critical Concepts of Agni (digestive fire) and Ama (toxin buildup):

In Ayurveda there are two concepts that we look at which greatly influence health, wellbeing and balance in the mind and body. These are the concepts of Agni (the energy of digestion, transformation, and metabolism most often referred to as the digestive fire) and Ama (accumulated toxins). There are various Agni's identified in the body, but the main Agni – the Jatharagni is in the small intestine and stomach which are the main organs of digestion and as such all the other Agnis depend on this. This Agni is of great importance. If a person's Agni is weak, they will not be digesting their food correctly and in some cases if the issue is with the subtle Agnis (more on a cellular level) this will create metabolism issues.

According to Ayurveda, if the Agni is not in good shape (if you are not digesting properly and/or if you have metabolic issues) the body is probably accumulating toxins – known in Ayurveda as Ama – there are various things that point to this, but suffice is to say if you feel bloated, lethargic, have sleep issues and struggle with energy, you most likely have levels of toxins that are causing these side-effects. Think about when you cook food on a low setting it

takes forever to cook, so when the body is not digesting correctly toxins build up and cause related health issues.

Ama – build-up of toxins in the body may be from the some of the following:

- Eating excessively;
- Eating often, munching, or eating before your previous meal is digested;
- Drinking ice cold water;
- Eating heavy, cold and/or dry foods;
- Irregular eating;
- Excessive fasting – not short fasts like not eating for 16 hours between dinner and breakfast – this is in fact very healthy to do. Normally, Agni is nourished by the food we eat. During prolonged fasting, Agni is depleted because it is not getting replenished by the food we eat.

General Guidelines for Preventing Ama (Toxin buildup):

- Avoid overeating and/or eating heavy foods in large quantities
- Avoid foods like the following: Leftovers, processed foods, canned foods, fast food or food with additives and colorings;
- Avoid ice cold water and drinks and cold foods;
- Eat warm, freshly cooked food;
- Make lunch your main meal and eat a light breakfast and dinner;
- Eat heavy foods in smaller quantities and more light foods;
- And calm the mind before eating.

How to Treat Ama:

- Try short periods of fasting: Skip one meal or eat a fruit instead of a large meal. Even better eat a small bowl of liquid soup for dinner. However, longer fasts are absolutely NOT recommended as explained above;
- Drink warm water, and/or eat liquid soups;
- Avoid all cold drinks and foods;
- Use digesting herbs such as ginger, black pepper, cumin seeds and garlic when you cook;
- In chronic cases, we suggest undergoing Panchakarma treatments (you will learn more about this soon).

Another way to bring your body back into balance and help develop good Agni is to follow the Lifestyle Routines we have discussed and to also use balancing foods for your Dosha. Of course, yoga, breathing techniques and meditation/mindfulness practices all play significant roles as well.