

# Eating the Ayurvedic Way

**Sheela Krishnaswamy, Diet, Nutrition & Wellness Consultant,** explores centuries-old ayurvedic principles in search of a healthy diet.



## **A** yurveda system of medicine utilises diet as one of the major means of treatment to cure diseases and

maintain balance in the body, true to the adage 'you are what you eat'. Can modern nutrition and Ayurvedic wisdom be combined to make a healthy meal? Sometimes, yes. Although the goals of the two sciences remain the same, the dietary approach is quite different. But many people mix and match the two patterns of treatment and create their own "expert advice" system.

Dr. Rangesh Paramesh, MD in Ayurveda, former lecturer, and now working as Head of Drug Discovery Team at Research and Development Centre of The Himalaya Drug Company, Bangalore, says that Ayurvedic physiology is based on the equilibrium of 'dosha' (energies circulating in the body), 'dhatu' (body building tissues) and 'mala' (excretions). Balancing of dosha is important in health and healing. The three doshas (Vata, Pitta and Kapha) are generated in the gut and modulated through food/ diet.

The dosha balancing effect of a food is determined by its taste – salty, sour, sweet, bitter, pungent or astringent – and other qualities. Imbalance in the doshas can be caused by unhealthy eating, mental stress, poor sleeping habits, negative emotions, etc. and will eventually lead to disease. To prevent this, it is important to maintain the doshas or restore them to a proper balance. In most cases, two doshas combine to make up our physiological and personality traits.

"Foods that are sweet, sour and salty in taste help to increase Kapha and control Vata. Those that are bitter, pungent, astringent help to increase Vata and control Kapha. Foods which are sour, salty, pungent in taste increase Pitta, and those that taste astringent, bitter and sweet, control or pacify Pitta" says Dr. Rangesh.

It is believed that Vata types should eat plenty of 'heavy' foods such as meats, cereals, breads, desserts, and drink warm fluids. Raw foods, dry foods and cold beverages are best avoided or eaten in small quantities. The Pitta types should avoid fasting and feasting. Vegetarian diets are best suited for them, but they should avoid/ reduce spicy and overcooked foods. Kapha types are prone to weight gain and therefore should eat only when hungry. Light and dry foods, raw foods, ginger, etc. are beneficial for them. Rich foods, meats and fried foods are certainly not on the Kapha list.

Whatever the dosha one may carry, Ayurvedic principles encourage consumption of fresh and natural foods. Pitta dosha is believed to be responsible for digestion and metabolism and this dosha is active from 10 am to 2 pm. So some Ayurveda followers say that everyone regardless of their dosha should take their largest meal – during this time frame, perhaps around noon. An active metabolism will help in better absorption of nutrients and

elimination of waste. But according to Dr. Rangesh, the time (and quantity) for food intake depends upon the individual's digestion and metabolism capacities. If one violates this guiding rule and fills himself up for the sake of time or availability or other obligations, there's a higher risk of many diseases – metabolic, infectious or immunological.

The strong belief in India that foods give 'heat' or 'cold' to the body is explained by Ayurveda as catabolic (reduce body weight) or anabolic (increase body weight) effects of food. Dr. Rangesh adds that the sattvic concept of food has not stemmed from Ayurveda per se and hence, we find meats also listed in the Ayurvedic texts.

Ayurveda is one of the most ancient systems of medicine in the world. Following its dietary principles will not make a person malnourished provided all varieties are eaten in the right proportion and according to individual requirements. This basic rule is akin to the modern nutritional science. Although modern foods are contaminated with environmental pollutants present in the air, water and soil, organically grown foods might still contain the benefits that have been mentioned in Ayurvedic literature.

Some of the basic rules of Ayurvedic eating that are easy to follow:

1. Include the six tastes in your meals everyday. This will probably reduce cravings.
2. Opt for whole foods that are fresh and seasonal.
3. Choose a variety of foods without excluding any food groups, including spices and herbs. (Modern day advocates of fad diets like low-carb, no-fat, fruits-only, high-protein, etc. would probably be horrified at this concept!)
4. Avoid cold beverages during meals.
5. Let your hunger, digestion and metabolism guide you to eat right.
6. Eat slowly in a calm environment and without distractions.
7. Get help from a qualified Ayurvedic physician if you need to analyse your body constitution or if you require this form of holistic treatment.

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