

## **Dietary Recommendations from the Ayurvedic Perspective: Dosha Specific Diets**

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Ayurveda is a system of medicine that dates back over 5000 years to the ancient Vedic culture of India. It is considered by many scholars to be the oldest healing science. The word Ayurveda means “The Science of Life” and it incorporates not only medicine and healing but also daily and seasonal recommendations that teach us how to stay well. It is for this reason that Ayurveda is primarily a prevention system. If we become ill it has medicine to treat the illness, but staying well is the best medicine.

Health happens, according to Ayurveda, when the mind, emotions, body and spirit are all balanced. This occurs through proper thinking, diet, lifestyle and proper use of herbal remedies. Health is defined in this ancient Ayurveda *sutra* (aphorism) from the *Sushutra Samhita*:

*The one who is established in the Self, who has balanced doshas (vata, pitta, kapha), balanced agni (digestion that is quiet and regular), properly formed dhatus (tissues), proper elimination of malas (waste products) properly functioning bodily processes, and whose mind, soul, and senses are full of bliss, is called a healthy person.*

Ayurveda defines life as the combination of body, mind, and spirit and embraces all of creation as one. The purpose of the medical science of Ayurveda is to heal and to maintain the quality and longevity of life.

For the purposes of this article, I will briefly introduce the doshic system of Ayurveda and then explain dosha specific diets.

### **Doshas**

Similar to other ancient systems of medicine, Ayurveda uses a constitutional model for assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of imbalances/disorders found in the body. The constitution comprises the individual’s physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual characteristics. It is created at birth and remains the same throughout life. It is an ancient way of recognizing our genetic code. There are many factors, both internal and external, that can affect a person’s constitution and move them out of a balanced state. These include one’s emotional state, diet and food choices, seasons and weather, physical trauma, as well as work and family relationships. Since Ayurveda views each person as unique and as having an individual pattern of energy, recommendations for health and healing are different for everyone.

Ayurvedic philosophy states there are energetic forces that influence all of nature and are present in everyone and everything. In addition, it states the entire universe is comprised of the five great elements: ether (or space), air, fire, water, and earth. These five elements come together in a specific pattern to create the “*tridosha*”, or the three constitutions

(called doshas) that Ayurveda uses for diagnosis and treatment of diseases, disorders, and imbalances in the human body, mind, and spirit.

The qualities of ether and air come together to create the constitution called *vata*. Vata roughly translates from Sanskrit to mean wind. The qualities are light (in weight), dry, cold, rough, subtle, and mobile. Vata is subtle energy associated with movement. It governs breathing, blinking, muscle and tissue movement, beating of the heart, breathing of the lungs, and all bodily movements. The vata individual has a tendency to be light in weight and cold. They love the heat and have a tendency to get over-involved due to their many interests. When in balance it promotes creativity and flexibility. When out of balance it produces fear and anxiety.

The qualities of fire and water come together to create the constitution called *pitta*. Pitta roughly translates from Sanskrit to mean fire. The qualities of pitta are hot, sharp, light (bright light), liquid and oily. Pitta expresses as the body's metabolic system. It governs digestion, absorption, assimilation, nutrition, metabolism, and body temperature. The pitta individual is generally warm and prefers to be cool. They enjoy intellectual pursuits and are often in a teaching or leadership role. In balance pitta promotes understanding and intelligence. Out of balance, pitta arouses anger, impatience, hatred, and jealousy.

The qualities of water and earth come together to create the constitution *kapha*. Kapha roughly translates from Sanskrit to mean water (or phlegm). The qualities of kapha are heavy, dense, slow, stable, soft, smooth, cool, oily, and liquid. Kapha is the energy that forms the body's structure and manages the fluids of the body. Kapha governs the bones, muscles and tendons and provides the "glue" that holds cells and structure together. Kapha supplies the water for all bodily parts and systems. It lubricates joints, moisturizes the skin, and maintains immunity. Kapha individuals are kind and soft hearted. They rarely over-react and are fair minded. They have a tendency to gain weight if they eat too much food. In balance, kapha is expressed as love, calmness, and forgiveness. Out of balance, it leads to attachment, greed, and envy.

Ayurveda teaches us that we all have the three energies of vata, pitta and kapha within us. Usually, two of the constitutions are more predominant and one less so. For example, the terminology used is to say that someone has a vata-pitta constitution or a pitta-kapha constitution. The goal is not to make all three equal but to find your own unique combination.

### **Balance in Nature**

From a larger perspective, the concepts of *like increases like* and *opposites balance* are essential to understand. These concepts are truisms in nature. Consider a person who has cold (vata or kapha) constitution. If they stand outside on a cold winter day, they will become colder. If this person eats ice cream as they stand in the cold, the cold quality increases more. Adding heat in the form of going inside, sitting by a fire and having a warm drink will remedy the situation. This is a simple example to explain the idea that adding more of the same quality increases the quality involved and adding the opposite

quality brings balance. If we understand these concepts as true, then it is clear that the innate qualities of each dosha (mentioned above) are balanced by their opposite qualities.

### **Dietary Recommendations According to Dosha**

Ayurveda generally recommends choosing whole, organic, seasonal foods and preparing them according to the season. A central rule in Ayurveda is to never overeat. When considering healthy food it is important to avoid looking at certain foods as “good” or “bad” for certain doshas. This may be helpful in an acute illness situation, but it is best to avoid rigid thinking and an “all or nothing” attitude when thinking about food. It is more helpful to understand the principles of Ayurveda. Most foods are considered “tridoshic” or healthy and digestible for everyone. The adjustments made according to each individual are where an Ayurveda practitioner can be helpful. The information in this article will also be helpful in giving general recommendations for each dosha and determining not only what to eat, but also how to eat it.

Knowing your Ayurvedic constitution takes the guesswork out of choosing which foods to eat and how to prepare them. Selecting the right foods and cooking and preparing them in a way that brings balance to your doshas are powerful ways to manage your health and wellbeing.

Again, an Ayurveda practitioner can be helpful in helping you determine your constitution, but filling out an Ayurveda Constitutional Questionnaire can a helpful beginning to your journey with Ayurveda.

### **How to Complete the Questionnaire**

The purpose of the questionnaire is to help you determine which dosha or doshas are predominant in your constitution.

- Read through the chart and determine which characteristics are predominant in you
- Check the box that best describes you
- Add up the number of checks in each column

## Ayurveda Constitutional Questionnaire

Body Frame	Thin, narrow, irregular, very short or very tall	Medium build, proportionate, toned	Heavy, broad, thick, evenly proportioned
Weight	Light, lean, easy to lose, hard to gain	Medium, easy to gain, easy to lose	Tends to overweight, easy to gain, hard to lose
Skin	Cold, dark, dry, thin, rough, tans easily	Warm, light and rosy, oily, freckles & moles sunburns easily	Cool, soft, thick, pale, few to no moles, tans easily,
Hair	Dry, thin, brittle, dark	Straight, oily, fine, blond, gray, red or bald	Thick, wavy, oily, curly, luxuriant, all colors
Muscles	Thin, wiry	Well defined	Strong, thick
Eyes	Small, dry, active, nervous, black, brown	Almond shaped, sharp gaze, hazel, light brown or blue, red, sensitive	Large, beautiful, black, blue, calm, loving
Nose	Narrow, small crooked	Sharp, pointy	Round, button type nose
Nails	Dry cuticles, small ridged, brittle	Clear, well-formed, flexible, pink	Thick, square, white, moist, evenly shaped
Teeth	Irregular, crooked, receding gums	Medium, slight yellowish, gums may bleed easily	Big, strong, pearly white, strong gums
Appetite	Irregular, may forget to eat	Intense, never forgets to eat	Slow, steady, eats because it is time to eat
Evacuation	Constipated usually	Regular, soft to loose	Slow, regular
Sweat	Scanty	Profuse	Moderate
Stamina	Poor, tires but pushes self	Moderate, driven	Excellent, but prefers to sit
Sleep	Poor, irregular	Moderate, light	Long, deep
Speech	Rapid, irregular, scattered, may be non-stop	Sharp, purposeful, inspiring, critical/judgmental	Soft, smooth, melodious, slow
Total Checks	VATA	PITTA	KAPHA

Your constitution is primarily \_\_\_\_\_, secondarily \_\_\_\_\_ and least \_\_\_\_\_.

### Dietary Choices for Dosha Balance

## **Balancing Vata**

The qualities of vata are derived from the elements that create it: Space and Air. These qualities are light, dry, cold, rough, subtle, and mobile. Additional attributes include erratic, dispersing, changeable and astringent.

Any food or activity that increases these qualities will bring about an increase in vata and therefore an imbalanced situation. The vata predominant individual will do well to engage in activities and eat foods that have the opposite qualities in order to have health and harmony in their life. The qualities to choose are: warm, moist, oily, stable and grounding, smooth and soft, calm and regular.

### **Dietary Choices to Balance Vata**

- Choose warm nourishing cooked food that is moist, mildly spiced, cooked with oil so that it is lubricating and comforting.
- Tastes that are sweet (fresh or cooked fruit, grains, dairy), sour (lemons and limes), and salty (salt is warming and moistening) are the best choices for vata. Avoid excess pungent, astringent and bitter tastes in the food.
- Eat sitting down in a calm, warm, secure, comfortable environment.
- Do not eat while rushing around or moving in any way, such as driving or walking.
- Drink warm teas regularly, preferably non-caffeinated. Herbal teas are great.
- Avoid cold, iced food and beverages, or anything that is frozen.
- Raw food should be taken minimally in summer and avoided other times of the year. Fermented food may be taken in moderation.
- Maintain a regular routine of bedtime (10 PM) and rise time (6 AM) and regular meals. Do not skip or delay meals. Eat regularly.

## **Balancing Pitta**

The qualities of pitta are derived from the elements that create it: Fire and Water. These qualities are hot, sharp, oily, light, and liquid. Additional attributes include spreading, fleshy or foul smelling, and sour.

Any food or activity that increases these qualities will bring about an increase in pitta and therefore an imbalanced situation. The pitta predominant individual will do well to engage in activities and eat foods that have the opposite qualities in order to have health and harmony in their life. The qualities to choose are: cool, dry, calm and smooth, and an attitude of surrender or letting go greatly benefits the pitta individual.

### **Dietary Choices for Balancing Pitta**

- Choose foods that are cooling and spiced mildly. Choose whole grains, and fruits that are sweet and ripe and vegetables that are cooling and sweet.
- Dairy products such as fresh milk, and cottage cheese, cream cheese or fresh goat cheese are soothing to pitta. Avoid mixing dairy and fruit.

- Emphasize foods that have tastes that are sweet (diary, fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains), bitter (all greens except spinach), and astringent (legumes, apples, potatoes). Avoid foods that have sour, pungent and salty tastes.
- In general, avoid fermented food.
- Eat three regular meals a day. Do not skip meals. Meals should be at about 6 to 8 AM – breakfast, 11 AM to 1 PM – lunch, and 5 to 7 PM – dinner.
- Emphasize foods that have minimal oil, cooling and are slightly heavy.
- Foods to avoid include excess oily foods, fried food, salt, caffeine, alcohol, vinegar, garlic and raw onion, and red meat.
- Avoid eating late at night or when emotionally upset or feeling stressed.
- When eating eat. Sit down and focus on the food. Do not read, watch TV, work at a computer or have an intense conversation.
- Keep a regular daily routine. Go to bed by 10 PM. Do not go back to work after dinner.
- Enjoy dandelion tea regularly to cool and sooth pitta.

## **Balancing Kapha**

The qualities of kapha are derived from the elements that create it: Water and Earth. These qualities are heavy, oily, dense, cool, liquid, soft and smooth, slow and stable. Additional attributes include sweet and dull.

Any food or activity that increases these qualities will bring about an increase in kapha and therefore an imbalanced situation. The kapha predominant individual will do well to engage in activities and eat foods that have the opposite qualities in order to have health and harmony in their life. The qualities to choose are: light, dry, warm, hard, rough, vigorous and changeable.

## **Dietary Choices for Balancing Kapha**

- Get regular vigorous exercise so that calories are burned on a regular basis.
- Tastes that are balancing to kapha are pungent (fresh and dried ginger, onions and peppers), bitter (all greens and all vegetables), and astringent (legumes, all except soy) and drier foods.
- Food choices should be dry, light and warm.
- Enjoy abundant vegetables, herbs and spices.
- Avoid eating oily, fatty or fried food.
- Iced food and beverages should be avoided.
- Carbohydrates are challenging for kapha to digest. Grains should be taken minimally. Best choices are lighter, high fiber grains such as toasted oats, millet, quinoa, barley, rye, and buckwheat.
- Goat dairy may be taken in small amounts. Avoid cow dairy.
- It is not necessary for kapha individuals to take excess water. Drink according to thirst and the season.

This article offers a beginning understanding of Ayurveda and its approach to food and nutrition. If you are interested in further information please check out the many interesting websites on Ayurvedic nutrition. One helpful website is [www.joyfulbelly.com](http://www.joyfulbelly.com)

Contact Marcia if you have questions or are interested in an Ayurveda consultation.

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