

## Structuring Life and Diet to Maintain Optimal Digestion and Health: Dietary advice from Ayurveda, Yoga, and modern nutrition

- *Proper digestion is the root of good health.*
- *Ayurveda is highly individualized in its application.*
- *Don't eat anything you cannot digest*

**Why is good digestion so important?** In the last decade, western medicine has begun to answer this question with the information that good-gut bacteria are connected to 1) our mental function and well-being, 2) our immune function, and 3) our metabolism, eg. weight gain/loss.

**Ancient Ayurveda, which also noticed these relationships (without, of course, the added explanation of bacteria), related poor digestion to the concept of aam.** Simply stated, *aam* is the toxic products of poor digestion, deriving from any processes of poor digestion. The first sign may be the appearance of a prominent coating on the tongue, which is the main reason that Ayurvedic practitioners examine the tongue. Symptoms of poor digestion may include: chronic gas, stomach or abdominal bloating, constipation (less than one stool per day or difficulty evacuating), frequent (more than 2-3x per day) or loose stools, undigested food particles in stools, mucous in stools, discomfort or pain on evacuation, belching, or hyperacidity/reflux. *These digestive symptoms are usually accompanied by low energy and feelings drowsiness, heaviness, lack of motivation, weakened mental clarity, mild depression, and in some people, joint pain.* In this case, the weakened agni (digestive fire) is unable to clearly separate what is good for the body from what should be excreted, thus leading to the absorption of toxins, and possible loss of needed nutrients. This process is believed in Ayurveda to underlie, in significant part, a large number of chronic diseases such as allergies, autoimmune diseases, and inflammatory conditions in the body, and to increase depression and fatigue. Thus, correction of aam is of major concern in Ayurvedic treatments, and its correction can often lead to a marked diminution of symptoms.

## How can we avoid creating Aam?

- I. The first rule is: Do not eat anything you cannot digest. Respect your body's attempts to communicate that it cannot handle a particular substance: gas, belching, hyperacidity, diarrhea, constipation, feelings of heaviness and lethargy. Each person's capacity to digest a given food item is different. *Some of these differences are genetic, some are doshic. Some simply relate to the way in which the food item is prepared* (eg. some foods are rendered more digestible simply by cooking them with spices). If the main problem is in the stomach, please note what you just ate in your recent meal. If the problem is lower in the abdomen, the problem may be due to food consumed earlier than your most recent meal.

**Multiple food sensitivities often spring from deeper problems with the digestion itself** (such as single-celled parasites or bacterial dysbiosis), or to one or two frequently- consumed food items, which the individual cannot digest, such as gluten, soy, or dairy. The inflammatory response which ensues often sensitizes the gut to other foods, which would, under normal circumstances, be digestible. If these deeper causes are resolved, the person's capacity to digest other items on the "food allergy list" is enhanced.

**2. Gluten intolerances** are genetic, and not all of them lead to celiac disease. They are very common among people with northern European ancestry, and are also known to occur in other parts of Europe, the Middle-East, and South Asia. Outside of this ancestral area, gluten intolerance is rare, and there is no need to avoid wheat or other gluten-containing grains. In the US, recent research indicates that approximately 30-40% of people have the genes for gluten intolerance, and their expression is triggered by a common, non-harmful virus. *If you have digestive symptoms, the one-month gluten-free trial is an easy way to test. The DNA saliva test is also a reliable indicator; the antibody blood test is not. Because consuming gluten for those who are intolerant is associated with a number of diseases, some of them quite serious, avoiding gluten for the gluten-intolerant is an important health measure* Gluten-containing grains are usually considered to be the following: wheat, rye, spelt, kamut, and barley. (Oats in North America are commonly harvested along with wheat, and thus may contain gluten, unless labeled as "gluten-free.") Other whole grains can be easily substituted.

**3. Dairy is a much more complicated issue.** Milk is highly valued in Ayurveda for its *ojas* (vitality and immunity)-forming and sleep-promoting abilities, but in Ayurveda:

- 1) milk and cream (as opposed to cultured dairy products) are also regarded as being incompatible to consume at the same time as most foods. Ayurveda teaches that we should not take milk within three hours of eating most foods (except sweets, grains, and sweet fruits such as dates or mango which may accompany milk).
- 2) Milk and cream are also considered to be very *kapha* in nature, and thus should only be taken warm (alone or in hot tea) and accompanied by warming spices. Warm organic milk can be taken with honey and a little spice (such as cardamon, turmeric, ginger, nutmeg,) before bed to enhance vitality and promote good sleep, or in chai as an afternoon rejuvenative. Pasturised, non-homogenised grass-fed organic milk is preferable to homogenized if available. Organic lactose-free milk is available for people who are lactose-intolerant.

- **Lactose intolerance** is prevalent in most of the world's populations. It occurs at the point when children in these populations reach the age in which they naturally lose their body's ability to make the enzyme lactase, which breaks down the naturally-occurring sugar (lactose) contained in their mother's milk (and other mammal mothers' milks, too). The bacteria used to make cultured milk products like yogurt, buttermilk, cheese, and kefir, also break down lactose. Lactose intolerant people can usually digest these foods, but not milk, cream, or ice-cream, unless taken with lactase.
- People who can easily digest milk and cream throughout their lives are usually descended from people in populations which developed herding economies where animal milks formed an important part of the diet. In such populations, there was natural selection to keep the lactase-producing genes turned on throughout life in order to utilize this superior source of protein.
- **People who cannot digest casein or other milk proteins** exhibit negative digestive reactions to any kind of dairy product other than ghee, and are advised to avoid them completely. In Ayurveda, almond milk is considered the best substitute for cow and goat milk.

4. Numerous studies have indicated that **good gut bacteria** play a significant role not only in digestive health, but also in mental health, immune function, and weight. Yogurt, skyr, buttermilk, filmjolk, kefir, sour cream, saurkraut, kimchee, are all helpful for obtaining additional good gut

bacteria; trying a number of different brands is usually necessary to find the best fit for your own gut biome.

**5. Eat WHEN you can digest.** Don't force yourself to eat when you are not hungry. Don't skimp on lunch. Don't overeat. Try to eat at regular times, but base these regular times on your own digestive capacity. Most people digest best around noon, so the largest meal for most people should be around that time. But agni can vary according to chronotype. For many adults, two abundant meals per day (late morning-noon and dinner), as in the Hatha Yoga system, are adequate. If a person needs three meals per day (because of a high metabolism or lots of physical activity), attention in meal planning should be given as to whether the person is hungrier in the morning or in the evening.

6. The digestive organs are not like the heart---they require rest in order to function optimally. Ayurveda regards continuous grazing as extremely destructive to agni. **After eating a meal, wait at least three to four hours before taking solid food again** in order to rest the digestion. Snacks between meals should be liquid---light, healthy beverages which you enjoy. Continuous "grazing" is considered extremely destructive to agni, and is a major contemporary cause of *aam*.

**7. A Yogic recommendation is to fast one day per week** on liquids of your choice from after dinner one night until dinner the next night. This rests the digestion. Longer, fresh-food liquid meal diets done periodically (usually seasonally) can also rejuvenate the digestion and metabolism. Ask your practitioner for more information.

**8. Take time to eat healthy, satisfying meals with abundant differently colored vegetables and fruits, varying tastes, adequate protein, and healthy oils, choosing foods and preparing them appropriate to season and your own *prakrti/vikrti*.** (See also: Eating According to Your Own Nature: Dietary Recommendations to Balance the Doshas). I also recommend the 70/30 diet as a general strategy to reduce inflammation and enhance health. For most North Americans this entails reduced consumption of grains and meats, inclusion of small amounts of easily digestible whole grains, beans, and nuts, cage-free eggs and organic yogurt, and greatly increased amounts of fresh vegetables and fruits.

**9. Use spices** appropriate to *vikrti/prakrti* and the time of year when seasoning your food. Including digestive herbs in your meals can promote

both digestion and healthy metabolism, and are also an important part of your individualized Ayurvedic formula.

**10. Avoid taking iced drinks** (including ice water) and ice cream, which lower the digestive fire, with meals. Such items should be consumed only in the daytime on very hot days well away from mealtimes, not otherwise. Let refrigerated foods come to room temperature before eating them.

**11. Avoid overly processed foods and food additives, white sugar, and dairy products and eggs which are not organic. Pesticides become more concentrated as they move up the food chain. When buying produce, try to buy "dirty dozen" (12 highly-pesticided fruits and vegetables) items organic.**

12. Avoid red meat altogether, and eat chicken and fish sparingly or not at all. We may like the taste of meat because we have been brought up to eat it, but it has more health detriments (especially red meat, which is difficult to digest, and, when cooked, forms carcinogens) than benefits, and inflicts needless fear, pain, and suffering on the animal who, in modern western societies, is killed to satisfy momentary desires rather than to meet any real dietary need. Try to buy dairy products and eggs from humane farms.

13. Drink and cook with filtered water--chlorinated water is a mucosal membrane irritant, tap and well-water in some localities contain impurities, and while chlorination kills most bacteria, it does not remove parasites which can, occasionally, contaminate drinking water. Ayurveda recommends drinking water before meals, while hot tea can be consumed as an after-dinner beverage.

14. Beverages: *Soda pop* is unfriendly to the digestive system and the metabolism, and promotes weight gain even if it is diet soda. There are some well-documented metabolism-promoting health benefits to drinking *coffee* which apply especially to Kapha individuals or kapha aggravations. For other people, coffee can be an addictive substance, and aggravate vata disorders such as anxiety and insomnia. The oils in coffee can irritate the stomach, especially in pitta individuals and those with stomach acid problems. *Green tea* comes highly recommended: it contains less caffeine than coffee, is anti-inflammatory, anti-oxidant, and promotes metabolism. Afternoon *chai* is nourishing and helps to balance our energies during the vata time of the day.

15. Do not boil, bake, or cook honey (cooked honey is used as an emetic in Ayurveda). Sucanat, maple syrup, agave, barley malt, etc. can be used in its place. Adding honey to warm beverages is fine.

16. Take a short walk after lunch and dinner to help digest the meal. The lying nobleman pose for those who can do it easily, or lying on the left side after eating, are Yogic recommendations to help digest the just-eaten meal.

17. Please note that while stress is generally NOT an adequate explanation for severe digestive disorders, it can, nevertheless, be a contributing factor. Do your best to avoid stressful situations, and if you cannot avoid such situations, see your holistic practitioner or your therapist for help in managing the stress generated.

18. Amla and Triphala are often recommended in Ayurveda to promote elimination and remove toxins. These are usually taken in doses ranging from 1/2 tsp to 1T., and if used to promote elimination, are usually taken with hot water or herbal tea before bed. Triphala is contra-indicated with food.

19. Check your tongue for coating indicative of am. If you are following all of these rules, and you still have a coated tongue or digestive symptoms, see your Ayurvedic practitioner for further testing.