

Health Tips - Your Health: Guidelines from Ayurveda – IV

What should be our food?

Healthy food is compared with nectar in the vedic scriptures. At the same time, the scriptures also alert us to be careful about the quality of food, which apart from the gross and subtle properties of the ingredients, also depends upon the way it is earned, prepared and eaten.

**Annaharartham Karma Kuryadanindyam,
Kuryadaharam Prana Sandharnartham |**

**Pranaha Sandharyastatva Jijnasanartham,
Tatvam Jijnasya Yena Bhuryo Na Duhkham ||**

— **Yoga Vashishtha**

Meaning: Earn your food by proper (just and honest) means. Eat it with purity to sustain your vital energy (and body-force). Elevate your vital energy to be able to gain knowledge and attain vigorous potentials to get rid of all infirmities and sorrows.

We have discussed several aspects of eating habits as recommended by Ayurvedic scriptures in the last issue. Here we throw further light on healthy constituents of food. According to Ayurveda, the food we eat is used in the production/strengthening of seven major components/elements (dhatus) in the body; at a gross level, these dhatus are – physiological fluids, blood, serum, flesh, bones, muscles and sperm/ovum. Food is given prime importance here in prevention as well as in cure of diseases. It mentions a great deal on what kind of food should be taken for sustenance of a healthy body. As the levels of the three functional energies (vata, pitta and kaph or the tridosas) are regarded here to characterize one's natural constituent, the triplet of proper food, sound sleep and chastity are considered as the predominant factors in regulating the health of the mind-body system. Of these three, diet (food) is given maximum importance as it plays a direct role in the maintenance of the seven dhatus and in affecting the balance of the tridosas.

There is no constraint of diet imposed in the Allopathic methods of treatment, where medicines are given principal importance. But it is not so in the case of [Ayurveda](#) where, on the contrary, appropriately selected and controlled diet is an integral part of treatment so as to enhance vitality and regulate the medicinal effects in natural harmony with the entire system of the body and mind.

Maharshi Charak, one of the founder experts of [Ayurveda](#) has elucidated six aspects, which should be considered in deciding what is worth eating and what is not in a given condition.

Matrakalakriya Bhumidehadosa Gunantaram |

**Prapya Tattaddhi Dashyante Tato Bhavastatha Thata |
Tasmatsvabhavo Nirdistastatha Matradirashrayah |**

**Tadapekshyobhayam Karm Prayojyam Siddhimicchata |
Tadeva Hyapathyam Deshakala Sanyogaviryapramanati**

**Yogadbhuyastarampathyam Sampadyate |
Tatra Khalvimani Astavaharvidhivishesayatanani Bhavanti |**

**Tadyathaprak—atikarana Sanyogarashideshakalopayoga
Sansthopayoktastemani Bhavantill**

– Charak Sutra

Meaning: Quantity (of food), time (at what time it is prepared or is being eaten), process (of its preparation), place (including soil, climate and surrounding conditions, etc) at which its raw constituents have grown, constitution (chemical, botanical, properties, etc), defects (subtle and gross defects, unnatural effects or impurities, if any) — are the principal factors responsible for the making a food pathya (worth eating, healthy) or apathya (not worth eating, harmful). The unhealthy nature or flaw in any one or more of these could convert a generally edible food into non-edible or apathya. Charak further enjoins that some substances are naturally non-edible; they should never be used in food. Even the medicinal plants, vegetables and grains should be taken only in proper mode while taking into account the above aspects.

Eating Process:

The "Charak Sanhita" describes eight principal factors associated with the process of eating. These are collectively termed as – astavidh ahara vidhi vishesayatan. These are supplementary to each other and comprehensively represent the process of eating. Each of them contributes to healthy or negative effects of the food being eaten. These are: (i) natural quality of food; (ii) method of preparation of food (who prepares the food, how and where – all are part of this important factor; whereas, for most of us only the ‘taste’ matters), (iii) combination (of various components or constituents of the food); (iv) amount or quantity of food; (v) place (at which the food-ingredients are grown; where it is prepared and being eaten) – the seasonal effects are also included here; (vi) time (of preparation and consumption of food); (vii) the mode of eating; (viii) the physical and mental state of the person who is eating it.

The importance of above factors is justified scientifically. For example, it is well known that which food will be digestible in which season and in what quantity etc, depends upon the basic properties of the raw substances in it, the method of preparation (e.g., mixing some other substances increases or negates some of its qualities; or steam-cooking would be healthier than frying, etc) and upon the metabolic fitness of the person who eats it. That metabolic system is highly sensitive to mental condition is also confirmed in many

clinical trials the world over. Apart from these, the "Charak Sanhita" also takes into account the subtler aspects – e.g. the sanskaras of the food (this includes the manner in which it is obtained/purchased, the way the money/resources used in getting or preparing it are earned, etc) and the sanskaras (intrinsic tendencies) of the person who prepares the food, etc.

Types of Food:

Acharya Sushrut has described the major categories (from medical point of view) of food under the heading "dwadashashan vicara" in the following shloka:

**Ata urdhvam Dwadashashan, Praticaran Vakshayamah |
Tatra Shitosna Snigdha Ruksha, Dravshuskaika Kalika**

**Dwikalika Ausadhiyukta Matrahina
Dosa Prashamana V—atyarthah ||**

This shloka implies twelve different types of food in terms of their gross basic properties and also conveys what type is good under what natural conditions. Let us look at these properties and the conditions – in terms of the prominent natural constitution or tridosa-level and/or diseases caused by the imbalance in the tridosa – under which they are prescribed.

- 1. Shita (Cold):** This type of food (which has a cooling tendency) is advised for those suffering from acidity, heat or plethora. It is also advised for those weakened by excessive sexual indulgence, or due to some toxic effect.
- 2. Usna (Warm):** It is recommended for those suffering from the diseases or problems of excess of vata or kaph dosas. The food intake (in small quantity) after total stomach cleansing, fasting, etc, should also be of this category.
- 3. Snigdha (Smooth or Naturally Oily):** This type of food is suitable (in appropriate quantity) to suppress the dosa of vata. Those used to physical labor or substantial physical exercises also benefit from such food. It is also remedial against dry-skin, bony, thin or weak body.
- 4. Ruksha (Rugged & Arid):** It helps controlling the dosa of kaph. Those having fatty body or oily skin should also use this type of food.
- 5. Drava (Liquid or Watery):** The diet of those suffering from dryness inside the body (which may lead to boils, peptic ulcer, or ligament problems, etc) should consist of this type in substantial proportions.
- 6. Shuska (Dry):** Those suffering from leprosy, prameha (excretion of sperm and several vital hormones with the urine), erysipelas or wounds should be given dry food.

7. Eka-Kalika (One-timely): Those suffering from loss of appetite or weak digestive system should take food only once a day to help normalization of the appetite and metabolic disorders.

8. Dwikalika (Two-timely): In normal course, healthy people should take proper meals only twice a day.

9. Ausadhi-Yukta (Medicinal): Those who cannot take medicines orally may be given these mixed in appropriate food. Sometimes, specific medicinal plants or herbs are also advised as essential ingredient of the regimen in specific diseases.

10. Matrahina (Light): Those having liver problem, suffering from fever or having loss of appetite due to some other disease(s), should take light and easily digestible food. (This may be dry or liquid, warm or cold type, as per the nature of the ailment and natural tendency in terms of the level of tridosa).

11. Prashamanakaraka (Tridosa-Controller): For healthy as well as diseased persons, the choice of food should be according to the season and the level of dosas. For example, warm and sour and sweet food helps suppressing the vata dosa in rainy season.

12. V—atti Prayojaka (Naturally Soothing): For healthy persons, nourishing food is that which helps maintaining and strengthening the vital elements and stamina and which increases resistance against diseases.

Apathya (unsuitable) Food:

This category of food corresponds to what either causes some ailment or disorder of some kind or aggravates or prolongs an existing disease or weakness. The founders of [Ayurveda](#) had affirmed food as the essential source of sustenance and strengthening of health. However, they had also alerted that "what one eats and how?" – could be the major factor for or cause of illness; it could even prove to be toxic. In fact, the same type of food could have contrary effects, though invisible, under different circumstance or for different persons; most important is — what kinds of guidelines one follows in the selection and preparation of food and in his eating habits.

According to the following shloka appearing at "Sutra Sthan" in Charak Sanhita, the food or medicine, which might suppress an ailment or temporarily control the imbalance of the dosas but does not uproot or eliminate them completely – is also apathya (unsuitable and harmful).

**Yatkincitaddosamasadya, Na Nirharati Kayatah |
Aharajatam Tatsarvamahitayopapadyate ||**

We give below excerpts of what the Charak Sanhita describes as unsuitability of different types of foods or medicines under different circumstances:

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Place:

Rugged or arid food and herbs are harmful or unsuitable in a wild land or in a desert, while cold and greasy-smooth, oily or fatty substances or preparations (including medicines) are bad for health (or have negative effects) in a wet (highly humid) or swampy area.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Season:

Cold eatables and drinks and foods having chilling tendency are avoidable in winter; whereas the use of hot and spicy foods and substances having tendency to increase body-heat should be avoided during summer and spring.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Appetite:

Eating without having proper appetite is harmful. Similarly, not eating nourishing food in appropriate quantity even while feeling hungry is also harmful to health and has negative effect on appetite and metabolism.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Combination:

Eating a combination of ghee (clarified butter) and honey in equal proportion causes severe toxic effect (while individually each has important nourishing and medicinal effects if taken in appropriate quantity with respect to other factors). Similar is the case with several other 'non-compatible' combinations.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Body's Adaptability:

If one's body has got accustomed to acrid, spicy and hot (in tendency) foods then sweet and cold (in tendency) foods would be generally unsuitable to his body's adaptability.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Tridosas:

The food or medicine, that might have properties similar to those inducing the tendencies of any of the three dosas (vata, pitta and kaph) but, that causes contrary effects because of disharmony (with one's natural constitution, habits and physical or mental work pattern) in practice is said to be non-compatible w.r.t. the tridosas.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Utensils:

Boiling milk in pure copper pot makes it poisonous in its effects. These or some other types of metallic utensils are highly unsuitable for cooking meals; while several types of substances are unsuitable for preparation of chilled drinks, desserts, etc.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Eating Habits:

Eating hot (in tendency) food with cold (in tendency) substances or vice-versa, simultaneously or without substantial time gap causes harmful effects.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Digestive System:

Giving laxatives or strong medicines or foods to someone having a delicate digestive system or intra-body structure is harmful.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Sleeping Habits:

Food or medicine which intensifies kaph tendency is not suitable for people who are generally slow and sluggish in their routine or who sleep heavily; it further induces lethargy or drowsiness.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Routine:

Eating without proper excretion of urine and stools is harmful. Those desirous of good natural health should never eat food without really feeling hungry.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Sequence of Eatables:

Having water, cooling food or any medicines after drinking or eating smooth oily stuff causes negative effects. (One might even vomit instantly or have sour throat in such cases.)

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Cooking:

Eating half-cooked or overcooked or over-fried food is unhealthy. Similar is the case with food cooked using polluting fuel.

Non-compatibility w. r. t. Composition:

Drinking any preparation of mixing acidic substances (including fruits) with milk is harmful for health. Curd (unless well set and fresh) and desserts prepared with fruits kept in milk for some time — are also prohibited in Ayurveda.

The Twelve Categories of Nourishing Eatables:

Charak Sanhita (likewise some other Ayurvedic scriptures) discusses a great deal about the impact of food on physical, mental and spiritual health. It broadly classifies the nourishing substances into twelve categories as highlighted in the following shloka. This description is based on the common crops and vegetation available in ancient times. What other cereals, plants etc are available today could also be added into the corresponding categories.

Shukadhanyam Shamidhanyam Samatitam Prashasyate |

**Puranam Prayasho Ruksham Prayenabhinavam Guru ||
Yadyadagacchati Kshipram Tattallaghutaram Sm—atam|**

**Puranamam Sanklistam Krimivyalahimatapai||
Adeshakalajam Klinnam Yatsyatphalamasadhu Tat ||**

As per this shloka, the twelve categories of nourishing eatables are identified as — shuka: grains (cereals, e.g. barley, maze, wheat, rice, etc); shami: grains (all kinds of pulses and grams); shakas: (all fresh vegetables; fruits; greens - fresh, naturally green substances that contain chlorophyll), Ambu: (watery substances); Goras: (cow-milk and its pure, fresh products); Ikshu: (sugar cane and its fresh products); Krattana: (food cooked – on fire – from cereals, pulses and vegetables); Yaugika: (all kinds of nourishing minerals and compounds). Alcoholic substances (wine etc) and animal-based foods (including meat, fish, etc) are prohibited in Ayurveda primarily on the grounds of their negative impact on spiritual health and subtle mental tendencies.

We shall discuss each of the twelve categories in detail in the next issue so as to provide useful guidance to the readers on – "what to eat and how to eat?" in today's circumstances.