

Ayurveda

The Science of Life

The ancient Indian system of wellness focuses on balancing the forces in one's body for optimal wellbeing PHOTOGRAPHS CALVIN TAN

Dating back over 5,000 years, Ayurveda is an ancient Indian healthcare system that focuses on bringing the doshas (energies) in one's body into balance for optimum wellbeing.

In India, general Ayurvedic principles are loosely applied in most traditional homes, says India native and Ayurvedic chef Prashant Patel, who conducts Ayurvedic cooking classes in Singapore. 'Old grandmothers have roots and formulas although they may not have the scientific knowledge.' Commercialisation of the practice, however, only occurred about 50 years ago with increased foreign interest, according to Mr. Raman Gopalakrishnan, director of Ayurveda Healthcare Singapore Centre.

According to the centre's resident doctor Anu Jayachandran, the five elements that make up the universe – earth, water, fire, air and ether – are present in our bodies and are combined in different proportions into three doshas. It is rare for one to have equal amounts of all three doshas, and one or two are likely to dominate. This results in one's unique anatomical constitution that determines physical and physiological qualities such as built, temperament and character.

Although determining one's doshas is the first step towards achieving balance, Devi Mueller, clinical Ayurvedic specialist and owner of Patterns for Living, a holistic wellness centre in California, contends that it is not the most important one. One also must consider other factors such as age and climate.

The Three Doshas

The vata dosha is made up of air and ether, and vata-dominant individuals are usually very thin with lean musculature

and dry skin and hair. They are very creative and active, but also restless and forgetful. They have a tendency for body aches and pains, and stomach-related problems such as constipation.

Governed by the element of fire, pitta-dominant individuals are usually of moderate height and weight, with oily skin and hair. They are very efficient with excellent memory and drive, but can be over-analytical and short-tempered. Their inherent body heat results in strong appetites and good bowel movements, but also makes them susceptible to heartburn and infections such as fevers.

Governed by earth and water, kapha-dominant individuals are usually stocky and curvy, with well-developed muscles and high fat levels. They are very stable and loving, but sometimes, also dull and lethargic. While they have the strongest immunity of the three, they tend to have digestive difficulties and are prone to weight-related illnesses such as obesity, diabetes and high cholesterol.

The Ayurvedic Kitchen

Unlike Western healing systems, which rely greatly on synthetic medicine, Ayurvedic healing uses only natural ingredients, says Mr. Gopalakrishnan. 'Food is medicine and medicine is food.' Ms. Mueller elaborates: 'What we eat is what the tissues and systems in our bodies are built from. Like in the doshas, the same five elements are present in different proportions in food. Therefore, food can be used as a key component in achieving balance.'

Ayurveda classifies all foods into six categories – sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent and astringent. 'The human body naturally tries to maintain a state of



VATA



PITTA



KAPHA

DOSHAS

• VATA

A nourishing and warming diet that includes dairy and sweet fruits is beneficial for vata types.

• PITTA

Astringent, sweet and bitter tastes will cool and calm the fiery pitta dosha.

• KAPHA

Kapha-dominant individuals should take light meals consisting of easily digestible food.



‘The five elements that make up the universe – earth, water, fire, air and ether – are present in our bodies and are combined in different proportions into three doshas’

equilibrium of the doshas by means of preferences for specific flavours,' says Dr. Govind Gowri, technical advisor of Ayurvedic nutrition at the Ayurveda Association of Singapore. Sweet foods such as bananas nourish and soothe; sour foods such as lemons stimulate digestion; salty foods such as seaweed lubricate tissues and retain moisture; bitter foods such as fresh turmeric detoxify the body; pungent foods such as onions improve circulation and purify the blood; astringent foods such as pomegranate absorb water and are anti-inflammatory.

'Regardless of our doshas, we should incorporate all six tastes in our diet, but in varying quantities according to individual needs,' says Chef Patel. This is not as difficult as it sounds as many foods contain more than one taste. For example, turmeric alone is bitter, astringent and pungent. On top of a balanced diet, individuals should also try to include foods with opposing qualities as that of their dominant dosha, says Anjum Anand, author of *Eat Right For Your Body Type: The Super-Healthy Diet Inspired by Ayurveda*. 'Someone who is predominantly pitta should try to include foods that will cool the body and mind.'

Finding the Balance

As our doshas are never stagnant, it is important to constantly be aware and in tune with what we are experiencing in our bodies and minds before appropriate foods can be chosen to address any

imbalance, says Ms. Mueller.

According to Dr. Jayachandran, vata-types should eat a nourishing and warming diet and increase their intake of sweet, sour and salty food. This includes small fishes and all forms of dairy. They should also avoid cold items such as ice cream as that will aggravate their inherent 'coolness'.

Pitta types should aim for a cooling and calming diet that includes sweet, bitter and astringent tastes such as ripe fruits and curd. 'Heaty' spices such as chilli and pepper should be used in moderation, too.

Kapha types should cut down on sweet, salty and sour food. Instead, they should go for bitter, astringent and pungent tastes, and a light diet of easily digestible food such as rice and dhal. Spices such as ginger and garlic will help to increase their digestive fire.

Ayurvedic principles also caution against improper combinations of food items, as they are believed to cause ailments such as indigestion and skin rashes. According to Mr. Gopalakrishnan, pairings to avoid include meat and milk, ice cream and cold water, and equal amounts of raw honey and ghee. This can however be very stressful in a modern setting where it is difficult to have full control over our meals. Ms. Anand offers a simple guideline in her book: 'Try to eat simply with just few ingredients on your plate. The more complex your meal, the harder it is for your system to process.'

AYURVEDIC PRINCIPLES FOR DAILY LIVING

By Ms. Devi Mueller, Dr. Jayachandran and Chef Prashant Patel

- 1 Choose foods that are fresh and in season. Avoid genetically modified foods and go for organically grown produce whenever possible. The less processed the food, the better it is.**
- 2 Avoid having cold drinks with your meal as that dulls the digestive fire and impedes digestion. Have warm soup or water instead. It will also help to have a small glass of lassi or buttermilk after a meal.**
- 3 Eat with awareness and eliminate distractions. Avoid having your meal**

- while engaging in other activities such as reading, watching television and using the computer.**
- 4 Have three regular meals a day. Eat substantially for breakfast and lunch but keep your dinner light, as that is when our digestive systems slow down.**
- 5 Whenever possible, eat your food in order beginning with sweet, salty, sour, pungent, bitter and then astringent, so as to optimise digestion.**



SIX TASTES

Ayurveda classifies all food into six categories – sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent and astringent.

Pomegranate juice with fennel & mint

From *Eat Right For Your Body Type: The Super-Healthy Diet Inspired by Ayurveda* by Anjum Anand
SERVES 1 ● NO PREP

● COOK 3-4 MINS

Easy Superhealthy

Pomegranate juice is fantastic for all three doshas. Pomegranate cleanses the blood, aids digestion and is good for the heart and mind. Fennel seeds and mint add an extra dimension and are cooling, which is exceptionally great for pitta.

100ml water

½ tsp fennel seeds

200ml unsweetened pomegranate juice

3 fresh mint leaves, shredded
Any natural, unrefined sugar, to taste

1 Heat the water and fennel seeds in a small saucepan until liquid is reduced to 2 tablespoons.

2 Strain into the pomegranate juice and add the mint.

3 Sweeten if necessary. Drink up!

PER SERVING 144 kcals, protein none, carbs 36g, fat none, sat fat none, fibre none, sugar 30g, salt none

