

Good digestion - the key to good health.

An Ayurvedic perspective by Dr. Shaun Matthews.

Ayurveda, the traditional system of medicine in India, places great emphasis on the maintenance and restoration of one's digestive power in the prevention and treatment of disease. It gives a lot of attention to the selection and preparation of food as well as offering guidelines as to how food should be eaten. These recommendations are designed to facilitate the breakdown, assimilation and absorption of food and drink and the successful elimination of waste products from the body.

In order to best understand the Ayurvedic view of health and disease it's useful to know some basic Ayurvedic concepts. The first of these is **agni** which in Sanskrit means " fire ", it is the biological fire that governs metabolism. It refers not only to our digestive fire but also to the transforming force within in all of us. Agni is present in the body in three main areas, known as the **jatharagni**, the five **bhutagnis** and the seven **dhatuagnis**.

The jatharagni is located in the stomach and gastro-intestinal tract and is responsible for cooking the food, through the action of saliva, hydrochloric acid, different enzymes, bile and pancreatic juice. It also separates the nutrient portion of food from the wastes and makes possible the absorption of nutrients in the intestines and their further transformation to become plasma, the nutrient fluid portion of blood.

The five bhutagnis are mainly housed in the liver. They adapt the broken down food called the **ahara rasa** or chyle into a more homologous substance, which can then be assimilated by the tissues of the body. The seven dhatuagnis are located in the tissues of the body. They are responsible for the synthesis of the basic tissue elements in the body and exist as seven groups of enzymes. They synthesize the dhatus from the "cooked" food.

When the agnis act on the dhatus certain waste products are formed, these are known as **malas**. They are excreted from the body in the form of discharges from the ears and nose, bile, sweat, faeces etc.

The agni of the gastrointestinal tract is directly linked to the agni of the tissues and contributes to it and gives it strength. In this way the strength of tissue metabolic processes is fundamentally dependent on the strength of the agni in the gastrointestinal tract. As well as maintaining the nutrition of the tissues agni is also responsible for the proper functioning of the immune system. It destroys unwanted toxins, bacteria and parasites along the length of the gastrointestinal tract and also is involved in the production of antibodies that circulate in the blood.

When agni is functioning normally an individual experiences good digestion, a glowing complexion, adequate circulation, pleasant breath, plenty of energy and strong resistance to disease. However if agni is unable to digest food properly, food components accumulate in the large intestine turning into a foulsmelling and sticky substance. In Ayurveda this is termed **ama** and has the qualities of being unripe uncooked, immature or undigested. This substance clogs the intestines and undergoes chemical changes which create toxins. When ama is absorbed from the intestines and finds its way into bloodstream it causes blockage of the

channels of the body's tissues, known as srotas in Ayurveda. This process tends to take place in an individual's weakest organs, as the blockage leads to stagnation, ama accumulates more and more reducing the immune mechanisms in the particular organ. The end result of this process being the manifestation of disease in the affected organ.

Ama may manifest locally or systemically, that is it may only be related to the gastrointestinal tract or it may enter into the general circulation. When mild but present over a long period of time it produces chronic diseases such as malabsorption or chronic inflammation of the stomach. When ama is severe, it is highly toxic and produces gastroenteritis and food poisoning. Systemic manifestations may be vague or localised to a particular organ, depending on which of an individual's organs are most susceptible.

From this brief look at the Ayurvedic conception of the digestive process, we can appreciate the fundamental link between proper digestion and good health. Ama is held to be the root of all disease. So if we can nourish and look after our digestive fire or agni, we can directly play a part in maintaining our good health and in preventing disease.

First of all one needs to know the state of one's agni, this is best determined with the help of an Ayurvedic physician though with experience one can accurately assess one's agni by noting particular symptoms and signs. Agni has four states in Ayurveda; high, low, variable and balanced. The state of your agni is influenced by many factors such as your diet, lifestyle, psychological stress levels and your bodily constitution, which is given great emphasis in Ayurveda.

When agni is high (**tikshnagni**) there is excessive appetite, circulation is strong, stools tend to be loose with some diarrhoea, resistance to disease is good but when disease occurs it is often sudden and severe eg. febrile illnesses or heart attacks. There is also a tendency to bleeding such as nose bleeds, bleeding haemorrhoids or gums.

When agni is low (**mandagni**) there is poor appetite, slow metabolism and a tendency to gain weight even without excessive food intake, circulation is poor, there is excess mucus in the body and colds and flus are more common. Diseases tend to be less severe.

When agni is variable (**vishamagni**) appetite alternates between being extremely hungry and forgetting to eat, circulation is also variable as is resistance to disease. Bloating, wind and constipation are common and debilitating diseases are more likely.

When agni is balanced (**samagni**) there is a regular and easily satisfied appetite, bowel motions are regular and there is little wind or bloating. It is accompanied by mental clarity and sharp senses.

In order to bring one's agni back into balance, Ayurveda makes use of simple practises which will influence one's agni. These include the use of simple and readily accessible herbs and spices in one's cooking, particular foods, exercise and yoga postures, fasting, changing sleeping habits and meditation.

Generally speaking agni is increased by pungent, sour and salty tastes and most spices, by exercises and yoga asanas, by deep breathing, meditation, light eating and fasting and by

sleeping less. It is decreased by sweet, bitter and astringent tastes, most damp, heavy and oily foods, a sedentary lifestyle, excessive sleep and too much sex.

Ayurveda also puts great emphasis on *how* food should be prepared and eaten in order to best nurture one's internal fire or agni. In this regard it makes specific recommendations as to the manner in which food is to be cooked and eaten. Included below are a number of basic Ayurvedic dietetic principles to be mindful of at mealtimes, they are particularly useful in preventing ama buildup in the body.

1. Lunch should be the main meal of the day as this is when agni is at it's strongest and best able to digest food consumed.
2. Try and avoid cheese, icecream and yoghurt at night. It is best to leave two hours after the evening meal for digestion before going to bed.
3. To facilitate digestion the stomach should contain one half solid food, one quarter liquid and one quarter space at the completion of a meal.
4. Silence or light relaxed conversation is desirable at mealtimes.
5. Never rush meals, try and sit down for all your meals.
6. Try not to eat when feeling very emotional, this impairs the digestive process.
7. Strive as much as possible to eat food prepared by yourself or someone that loves you [or someone you have a good relationship with].
8. Take time to listen to your body before selecting food items. Is this what your body really feels like?
9. Sipping fluids during meals is a good practise. Try and avoid very cold and iced drinks.
10. Milk should not be taken with meals having tastes that are salty or sour, especially fish, eggs, garlic or radish.
11. If still feeling full from your last meal, it is better to fast or eat lightly.
12. Avoid strong exercise, sex and sleeping during the first two hours after taking food.
13. Your diet should include all six tastes each day.
14. Try and spend time during each meal savouring the food you are eating. Tuning into the taste sensations on your tongue is a useful technique in this regard.
15. Adequate chewing helps start and promotes the process of digestion.
16. Try and avoid eating leftovers, unripe and improperly cooked food.
17. Spend a few moments sitting quietly after each meal before going back to or starting other activities.

It is important to say that the above list is only to be used as a guideline and is not something to be rigidly adhered to. Rather it can be used to help raise one's awareness of *how* one usually eats, the first step towards changing old habits that are not health promoting.

From this brief overview of the Ayurvedic approach to understanding digestion, we can see what a fundamental role digestion plays in the development of disease and in maintaining good health. By making simple changes to our selection of food, our lifestyle, exercise habits and our manner of eating we can nurture our agni and prevent the buildup of ama. In so doing the key to good health is ours.