

# Honouring your digestive fire – the secret to good health.

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Ayurveda, India's traditional system of healing, places good digestion at the very heart of its approach to creating a healthy immune system and in promoting wellbeing. Ayurveda uses simple, naturalistic metaphors to understand the process of digestion, metaphors which, in my experience, western medical science is still struggling to fully comprehend. It sees our digestive tract as the place where our food is literally "cooked" through the action of hydrochloric acid and various enzymes that break down carbohydrates, fats and proteins.

The Sanskrit word that is used to describe this process of transformation is "agni" and it literally means "fire". Its sacred role in the break down, absorption and assimilation of our food has been honoured in India for thousands of years. It exists not only in the digestive tract, but also as enzymes housed in the liver and in the tissues of the body.

When our digestive fire is effectively 'cooking' the food that we consume, we are left with a health-giving, nutrient broth that goes into the bloodstream to enliven our plasma. This mix of properly digested food is further processed by the liver which detoxifies the blood through the action of liver enzymes. Finally, the enzymes in the cells of our various tissues, further refine and process this food, giving us abundant energy and a sense of wellbeing.

When our digestive fire becomes overloaded by overeating, poor quality food and poor dietary habits, it is not able to properly cook our food and uncooked, unprocessed food enters our bloodstream. This is known as "ama" in Ayurveda and roughly translates as toxins. It tends to travel to our weakest organ and interfere with the healthy functioning of its tissues, whether it is our heart, bowel or lungs. Over time, these toxins can lead to the formation of disease and various kinds of health imbalances.

As a holistic science, Ayurveda recognises how our mind and our emotions influence our physical health. In order to best manage our digestive fire we need to care for ourselves physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Accordingly, in order to create a balanced digestive fire, we need to take into account not just our patterns around food and drink intake, but these other aspects of our lives. Are we exercising regularly? Are we getting enough sleep? Are we feeling bitter about a relationship we were involved in? Has an experience at work left us with a sour taste in our mouth? Have aspects of our life become difficult to digest? These factors also influence our digestive fire and our capacity to draw nourishment from our life.

So how can we better manage our digestive fire? Ayurveda maintains that we need to take a holistic approach and be proactive in creating a healthy diet and lifestyle. A healthy diet needs to be supported by regular exercise, good quality sleep, adequate rest, cultivating supportive friends and community and finding meaning in life. In this way, Ayurveda embraces the larger context of our lives, rather than focusing just on food, in guiding us in our search for better digestion.

**Dr. Shaun Matthews**