

Ritucharya - seasonal routines of health

By Dr. Shaun Matthews

In Ayurveda the traditional system of healing practised in India over the past 5,000 years, **ritucharya** or seasonal regimens are considered as one of the foundations for maintaining good health. It has long been recognised that our individual constitutions or body-types are affected by changes in nature throughout the yearly cycle. Most of us have experienced how a cold, overcast day affects us differently to a warm sunny day or how unsettling several days of cold gusty winds can be to our nervous systems.

Ayurveda utilises the simple but elegant principle that 'like increases like' to understand how the seasons will affect the energetic forces, known as **doshas** in Ayurveda, of our bodyminds. For example in summer the hotter, more humid weather and more intense sunlight increases the Pitta dosha, which is hot, moist and intense in its nature. Accordingly someone with a lot of Pitta dosha in their constitution is more likely to experience difficulties with overheating and irritability in the summer months. If Pitta dosha is then further aggravated by mental or physical stresses then they may experience fever, red skin rashes, stomach acidity or outbursts of anger.

Applying this principle further we can see that individuals with a lot of Vata dosha,

which is changeable, light, cold and dry, in their constitution are more likely to run into health problems in the autumn months and at the change of the seasons. Someone with a lot of Kapha dosha in their constitution, which is cold, moist, heavy and stable, will need to be most careful in the late winter and springtime if they are to avoid colds, hay fever and fluid retention. In this way the season to be most vigilant about is the one which corresponds to your individual constitution. In general terms - summer for Pitta dominated body-types, autumn and early winter for Vata dominated body-types and late winter and spring for Kaphas body-types.

Ayurveda places great importance on **preventive medicine**, the ancient texts emphasise that we should never wait until a disease has manifested in order to treat it. Doshic imbalances need to be addressed as soon as they occur. In this way seasonal routines work to pacify aggravated doshas in our constitutions before a disease can manifest.

In order to balancing your bodies' energies throughout the seasons of the year it is useful to follow the guidelines outlined below, though it is important that are not used in a rigid way which would be counter to the spirit of Ayurveda. Ayurveda is inherently an intuitive science, so these guidelines are best used to support a more intuitive approach to food, drinks and activities.

Ritucharya for summer.

Diet : a Pitta pacifying diet is best followed favouring sweet, bitter and astringent tastes. Agni is lower in summer so overeating needs to be watched out for. Salads and fresh green vegetables are cooling and best taken at lunchtime when the digestive or agni is strongest, in order to avoid creating gas.

Herbs : hot and spicy herbs should be avoided such as ginger, black pepper, chilli and cayenne pepper. Cooling herbs include coriander leaves and seeds and fennel.

Drinks : caffeine and alcohol tend to increase Pitta dosha, though a cool beer on a hot day is preferable to whiskey, brandy, rum and red wine which are pitta aggravating. Ice cold and iced drinks are best avoided as these depress the digestive fire and thus pave the way for the build-up of toxins.

A good afternoon drink is cooling lassi made with a 1/2 cup of yoghurt, a 1/2 cup of water, a pinch of cumin powder and a 1/4 of a squeezed lime mixed together in a blender.

Activities : sunbathing is best avoided and hard work under the sun will aggravate Pitta. A well ventilated hat and protection for the neck is important in preventing overheating. Sunglasses should only be used in summer during the brightest part of the day as authorities in Ayurveda maintain that constant use decreases visual acuity.

Swimming is excellent exercise in summer especially ocean bathing or even being close to aquatic and maritime environments. Washing off salt after ocean swims also helps to prevent Pitta dosha imbalances.

Cool evening walks under the moonlight are especially recommended for pacifying Pitta as is the wearing of cotton and silk. Cooling colours are white, grey, blue, purple and green. Clothes should be loose fitting and allow the skin to breathe. The wearing of white flower garlands such as frangipani and gardenias also balance Pitta.

According to Ayurveda too much sex in summer can aggravate Pitta as sex is heating. Ideally if you want to have sex the early evening is preferable to late at night when pitta is in it's prime. Early nights are recommended, that is going to sleep before 11 pm. Oil massage with coconut or sunflower oil is generally recommended depending on one's constitution.

Ritucharya for autumn and early winter.

Diet : a Vata pacifying diet is recommended favouring sweet, sour and salty tastes. Food should be well cooked and easy to digest. It should be served warm and heavier, more oily food is appropriate. Dry food such as popcorn, raw vegetables and nightshades [i.e. eggplant, potatoes and tomatoes] should be minimised. Frozen foods and ice drinks will aggravate Vata.

Herbs : most warming herbs and spices are balancing to Vata dosha though very drying spices such as chilli, mustard seed and black pepper should be taken in moderation.

Drinks : meals should be accompanied by plenty of warm liquids, a good tea for pacifying Vata dosha is made with equal parts of ginger, cinnamon and cardamom. Alternatively chamomile or liquorice tea or hot water is excellent.

Activities: Vata dosha is specifically increased by too much jogging, cycling, exercising and by working too hard. Rushing to be on time, long hours of study, staying up late at night and too much loud rock music or noise will aggravate Vata. Excessive talking, shouting, crying

and laughing will also do the same. In order to decrease vata we need to cease activity and this includes driving and flying. Sleep and rest pacifies vata. Meditation is also excellent. As Vata is cool, one should be careful to avoid draughts and keep warm. Natural fibres such as wool are advocated.

Oil massage with sesame oil is wonderful for pacifying Vata dosha, with particular attention to rubbing oil into the soles of the feet and into the scalp. Performed before bedtime this helps one to relax and promotes a sound sleep. Colours which pacify vata are red, orange and yellow. White is also OK. Excessive sexual activity also aggravates Vata. Drinking a cup of warm milk before bedtime is good in autumn and winter together with a pinch of cardamom, ginger or nutmeg. One should ideally be in bed by 10 pm.

Ritucharya for late winter and spring.

Diet : a Kapha pacifying diet should be followed with an emphasis on food that is lighter, drier and less oily. Warm food is preferable and food such as avocado, bananas, cucumber and dairy products should be minimised. One should favour tastes that are pungent, bitter and astringent. A good practice is chewing roasted cumin and fennel seeds after meals.

Herbs : ginger is an excellent herb at this time of year as are other warming spices such as black pepper, mustard seed, garlic and cinnamon.

Drinks : an excellent digestive tea can be made with equal parts of ginger, cinnamon and mint. Another good kapha tea is 1/4 tsp. dry ginger, 1/8 tsp. clove, 1/4 tsp. fenugreek and 1/4 tsp. of dill which can be sweetened with honey as desired. Drinking hot water with a tsp. of honey also helps pacify Kapha dosa. Cold drinks and ice-cream should be avoided.

Activities : Spring is a time for enjoying the outdoors, reconnecting with the joys of nature and being more physical active. Gardening, walks in parks with your children and days at the beach are all recommended. Taking time just to simply be with the blossoming of the flowers and the singing of the birds is a great discipline especially in the rush of city living.

Sleeping during the day aggravates Kapha and dampens the digestive fire. As a habit it is more likely to bring on Kapha illnesses such as hay fever, sinusitis and bronchitis. Air conditioning is also more likely to provoke Kapha dosha at this time of year.

Spring is the time for romance and the increase in one's energy and libido should be utilised with one's sexual partner. Oil massage using small amounts of safflower oil or a dry massage is recommended. This can be followed by a dusting with chickpea flour and a warm shower to remove excess oil. Cotton clothing is preferable and the wearing of the colours such as pink, orange, yellow and violet.