

Aahar - A Key Factor in Health

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Abstract:- The famous Upanishadic saying "Annam vai pranah" means that life is sustained by food. The body is described in the Nirukta as constantly changing; "Kshane kshane shiryaate tat shariram" means that the living body's every cell diminishes moment by moment and is replaced by new cells. For the nourishment of this depletion, food is essential. Maintaining a healthy body through appropriate timing, quantity, and manner of food intake ensures the well-being of the body. Therefore, Ayurveda emphasizes food as the primary pillar for maintaining a healthy body. Ayurveda provides detailed guidelines on balanced nutrition, including the avoidance of negative factors such as improper timing, quantity, and incompatible foods like contradictory combinations, stale food, etc. It emphasizes not only the prevention of diseases but also the use of appropriate food habits even in various disease conditions. Food plays a significant role in both the prevention and treatment of diseases in Ayurveda. Ayurveda suggests that food choices should be according to individual constitution or nature. According to Ayurveda, beneficial/nourishing food is conducive to overall health, longevity, strength, and intellect. To lead a disease-free life, Ayurveda emphasizes the importance of selecting appropriate food, combining foods correctly, and cooking methods, as well as consuming food in appropriate quantities at the right time. Digestion is also crucial. It advises against consuming unsuitable food (incompatible food) to maintain well-being. Ayurveda describes four types of foods: solid (to be eaten), liquid (to be drunk), semi-liquid (to be sipped), and light (to be licked). Following a proper diet leads to a healthy body, happiness, truthfulness, observance of celibacy, and ultimately towards liberation.

Keywords: Shadrasa, Virudhahar, Ritucharya, Diet

1. Introduction

In Ayurveda, the description of the universe is said to originate from the Panchamahabhutas (the five basic elements, namely Akash (ether), Vayu (air), Tej (fire), Jala (water), and Prithvi (earth)), which help nourish the tissues (dhatus), growth, development, and Ojas. Ayurveda primarily describes life's three pillars (Trayopasthambha) as the leading pillar. When the body receives support through Trayopasthambha, it becomes enriched with growth and strength. Food is considered as Maha-Bhaisajya (the best medicine). Various distortions in lifestyle and numerous diseases are attributed to faulty dietary habits, which can be prevented through appropriate food and habits. Ayurveda emphasizes that food choices should be made according to individual constitutions or characteristics.

According to Ayurveda, the consumption of beneficial or pathya food (nutritious food) is conducive to overall health, longevity, strength, and intellect. For a disease-free life, Ayurveda emphasizes the importance of selecting appropriate food, food combinations, and culinary practices, placing a burden on proper nutrition. Proper digestion is also emphasized. The timing of food intake, season, and place are also crucial. Avoiding harmful food (pathya food) is advised. Ayurveda describes four types of food, such as Asit (eatables), Khadit (chewable), Pint (drinkable), and Liddh (lickable). Consumption of appropriate food leads to a healthy body, pursuit of truth, and Brahmacharya (celibacy), ultimately leading towards salvation.

2. Taste (Rasa) and Food:

Food is essential for a healthy body and mind. Ayurveda suggests the inclusion of six tastes (Rasa) in an ideal diet. The term "Rasa" refers to taste and the knowledge perceived by the tongue. According to Acharya Vagbhata, there are six tastes: Sweet (Madhura), Sour (Amla), Salty (Lavana), Pungent (Katu), Bitter (Tikta), and Astringent (Kashaya).[1,2,3]

2.1 Sweet Taste (Madhura Rasa)

Sweet taste aggravates the Kapha dosha. The sweet taste is associated with the strength and stability of the body. Since birth, the human body is familiar with this taste. It benefits the skin, hair, sensory organs, and overall development of the body. Foods with a sweet taste increase breast milk production, soothe dry throats, and even help with erectile dysfunction in males. However, excessive intake can lead to obesity, obesity-related diseases, and diabetes. Foods such as milk, sugar, ghee, jaggery, dates, ripe mangoes, and grapes have a sweet taste. When consumed in large quantities over a long period, they can increase cholesterol levels. Therefore, Ayurvedic practitioners recommend sweet foods with moderate calorie content. People engaged in heavy physical labor, active outdoor activities, breastfeeding mothers, pregnant women, patients undergoing recovery, and those needing quick energy can benefit more from this type of food.

2.2. Sour Taste (Amla Rasa)

The sour taste stimulates digestion and appetite. It is good for the heart and increases thirst. Externally, it has a cooling effect, making the mind alert and attentive. Sour taste benefits the spleen (produces stability), sensory perception (stimulates sensory organs), satisfaction, taste enhancement, nourishment, lubrication of the body, and proper downward movement of the abdomen and rectum. According to Ayurveda, when consumed in excess, sour taste can have harmful effects on the body. It can cause looseness of the body, loss of strength, dizziness, fainting, jaundice, swelling, and other conditions. Amla (Indian gooseberry) is an example of a sour substance. In Vedic literature, amla was considered the best among all fruits. Although all sour substances are said to increase Pitta (digestive fire), amla is an exception because it balances Pitta. Clinical studies and scientific literature have shown that amla is an immunomodulator, antioxidant, tonic, antidiabetic, powerful antimicrobial, hepatoprotective, and exhibits hypocholesterolemic properties. The absorption of certain essential nutrients like calcium is highly dependent on the sour taste.

2.3. Salt Taste

The salty taste has a refreshing effect and helps to clear blockages from the channels of the body. It enhances the digestive process, stimulates the taste buds, serves as a preservative, and improves the flavor of food. In Ayurveda, there are mainly five types of salts used; among them, rock salt is considered the best. Rock salt is chemically identified as sodium chloride or halite. It is stimulating, mildly sweet, beneficial for the heart (or brain), balances the three bodily doshas (Vata, Pitta, Kapha), easy to digest, and hot in potency. The use of salt in food helps to lower blood pressure. It also aids in mineral balance and weight management by curbing cravings and eliminating fat cells. According to modern medicine, rock salt is beneficial for heart diseases and hypertension. Salt prepared in this way can be incorporated into lifestyles.

2.4. Bitter Taste

The bitter taste helps to alleviate throat disorders, bleeding disorders, allergic skin conditions, and other skin diseases. Furthermore, it reduces swelling, improves digestion, enhances circulation, clears the passages, encourages elimination, cleanses the blood and muscles, and reduces cholesterol. It clears the mind and sharpens the vision. When taken in larger quantities, it causes fainting, dizziness, thirst, depletion of sperm and strength. Generally, substances with a bitter taste act as aphrodisiacs.

2.5. Bitter Taste

The bitter taste is beneficial in a therapeutic sense. It is dry, light, and cold in nature, and generally exhibits potent anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, and antipyretic properties. It increases digestive secretions and stimulates

appetite while calming down the digestive fire. It helps to expel toxins, purify the blood, and remove waste from the body. It contains alkaloids, anthraquinones, and certain glycosides. Excessive consumption of bitter foods can cause nausea, dizziness, and dryness, and aggravate weakness. Bitter taste has strong anti-parasitic effects and also helps to restrain cravings for desirable substances by satisfying the mind and senses.

2.6. Bitter Taste

The main effect of the bitter taste is that it causes dryness in the throat. When used internally or externally, it constricts the blood vessels and accelerates the process of digestion. For this reason, bitter substances are often used to prepare digestive tonics, as bitter taste helps in reducing blood flow and inflammation. Bitter taste purifies the blood, eliminates ulcers, and provides a cooling effect. If consumed excessively, it can cause excessive dryness in the throat, hinder digestion, blockages in the intestines, and gas formation in the stomach, leading to dryness and pain in the heart area and obstruction of the body's channels.

3. Dietary Regulations (Dietary Practices)

According to Ayurveda, there is a sequence in which food should be consumed: it should start with sweet-tasting food and then progress to other tastes. Those who follow this should feel harmony, but those who deviate will feel discomfort. Starting with sweet taste in food should not overwhelm digestion because if it is consumed at the beginning of a meal, it strengthens the digestive fire. Simple food is easily digested and nourishes the tissues. Salt and sour tastes should be consumed to stimulate digestion and enhance taste. It is advisable to avoid consuming pungent and bitter tastes at the end of the meal because they stimulate dryness and clear the palate.[4]

4. Diet and Mind

According to the Bhagavad Gita's Karma Yoga chapter, beings are born from food. The origin of food is from rain, the origin of rain is from sacrifice, and sacrifice is performed as a duty. According to the Bhagavad Gita, the chapter on Shraddha-Traya-Vibhaga-Yoga, food is of three types - Satvic food, Rajasic food, and Tamasic food.[5]

4.1. Satvic Food

Sattva quality is a spiritual quality. Life, mental clarity, strength, health, happiness, and joy thrive in those whose mind is predominantly sattvic. Ayurveda recommends Satvic food for maintaining overall health, mind, and lifespan. Satvic diet includes fresh fruits, pure fruit juices, milk, honey, sprouted whole grains, land and sea vegetables, almonds, seeds, lentils, herbal teas. Satvic food does not overburden the stomach. Following Satvic food helps individuals lead a stress-free life and reduces the risk of mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, mood disorders, and hypertension.

4.2. Rajasic Food

Rajasic quality is the quality of passion and activity. Excessively spicy, bitter, sour, salty, pungent, hot, dry, and burning food, causing pain and disease, is Rajasic food. Rajasic food disrupts the balance of mind and body. This food makes the mind restless and hyperactive, increases concentration, affects the pattern of sleep, and increases the desire for anger. Those who are lazy and indifferent are advised to consume Rajasic food in moderation. This diet can include more sweets, pure oils, pure grains, sour food, fried foods, garlic, onions, fried foods, tea and coffee, green chilies, and garlic.

4.3. Tamasic Food

Tamasic food is the quality of inertia or inactivity, indifference, dullness, or lethargy. Tamasic food increases ignorance in indulgence. Fried and stale food, microwave food, fast food, processed food, leftover food from the previous night, meat, fish, eggs, and alcohol are included in Tamasic food. This food affects the pace of our behaviors and slows down their impact. It is better to avoid Tamasic food as much as possible because it makes people indifferent, increases anger. Tamasic food is the most unsuitable food for everyone.

5. Seasonal Regimen

According to Ayurvedic classics, based on the direction of the sun's movement, the year is divided into two ayans: Uttarayan (northern solstice) and Dakshinayan (southern solstice).[6] Based on this, religious rituals are categorized; three seasons make up one festival. Six seasons occur in one year, such as Shishir (Winter), Vasant (Spring), Grishma (Summer), Varsha (Monsoon), Sharad (Autumn), and Hemant (Pre-Winter). The first three seasons fall under Uttarayan, and the last three under Dakshinayan. These seasonal changes are primarily observed in the Indian subcontinent because Ayurveda originates from India. From January to July, during Uttarayan, seasonal changes from Shishir (Winter) to Vasant (Spring) and Grishma (Summer) occur. This period affects the environment adversely, impacting humans as well. During Dakshinayan, from Varsha (Monsoon) to Sharad (Autumn) and Hemant (Pre-Winter), seasonal changes occur. During this period from July to January, comparative changes are seen, especially when cold begins, leading to a prevalence of metabolic activities over anabolic activities in the environment. For each season, proper diet and lifestyle were explained in the classics. These seasonal changes also affect the microcosms within the body.

In the stories of Hemant and Shishir, due to the decrease in temperature, the digestive fire increases, and hunger and appetite also increase. If digestion is strong, the consumed food should be rich in taste and nutrients; otherwise, only bodily tissues (muscles) may be consumed. Therefore, during Hemant and Shishir (both in the beginning and the end), it is advisable to consume food made from fatty substances, oils, alcohol, ghee (fat from meat), and new grains. Therefore, during these seasons, it is advisable to indulge in sweating, oil massage, exercise, powders massage, and sunbathing.

6. Ayurvedic dietary guidelines include the following in the regimen: [7]

- Consume meals at regular intervals (regular meals).
- Eat according to the suitability of the food (appropriate diet).
- Consume food according to the individual's constitution (beneficial diet).
- Maintain proper hygiene (clean diet).
- Consume fatty foods (oily diet).
- Consume warm foods (hot diet).
- Eat easily digestible foods (light diet).
- Pay attention to the process of eating and drinking when food has taste (mindful eating).
- Consume meals with all six tastes (six-taste diet).
- Food should primarily be sweet in nature (sweet diet).
- Meals should be consumed peacefully, neither too slow nor too fast (neither too fast nor too slow).
- Bathe after eating.
- Eat only when hungry.
- Wash hands, feet, and face properly before eating.
- After prayer and offering respects to deities and ancestors, serve meals to guests, teachers, and children.
- Without criticizing the food, consume the quantity of food according to the person's capacity (proportionate diet), dividing it into four parts based on a hypothetical measure of the stomach's capacity, with two parts solid food, one part liquid food, and one part left empty for easy digestion due to gentle movements of the air.

7. Ashta Ahara Vidhi Visheshayatan

It is essential to have knowledge about the "Ashta Ahara Vidhi Visheshayatan" [8] to obtain the overall benefits of food.

- I. Nature - Attention should be paid to the nature of the food consumed, such as heavy (foods like jaggery, meat), light (foods like green gram which are easy to digest), cold (foods that have a cooling effect on the body like milk), hot (spicy foods that provide warmth), dry (foods that promote dryness), oily (unctuous foods like ghee, butter), and their effect on digestion.
- II. Processing - It indicates the transformation of food within the body through actions like digestion, absorption of water, etc.
- III. Timing - It suggests the appropriate timing of meals based on individual components of the body's activities, either enhancing or reducing them.
- IV. Quantity - It indicates the necessary quantity of food for each individual.
- V. Country - It is based on the availability and adaptability of food items to the individual's habitat and the season of their production.
- VI. Season - It considers factors like climate, digestion capacity, time of day, and the individual's health condition.
- VII. Institution of use - Food should be consumed according to the rules of dietary science.
- VIII. User - It indicates the consumer of the food. Guidance should be provided based on personal preferences and physiological homology.

8. Consideration of incompatible food (Food incompatibility)

Incompatibility or contradiction is a unique concept in Ayurveda. It refers to substances, whether medicines or food, that aggravate doshas, disrupt the normal biological equilibrium, and cannot be eliminated. Charaka Acharya has explained 'incompatible food' as food combinations or ways that prevent the digestion of tissues, inhibit the process of tissue formation, and promote the possession of conflicting properties. Food that is incorrect in combination, processed improperly, consumed in improper quantities, exhibits opposite properties, or consumed during inappropriate times of the day or season can become incompatible. Charaka has mentioned 18 situations, and this kind of wrong dietary combination can lead to various disorders like impotence, colic, blindness, dropsy, mental disorders, epilepsy, coma, fainting, intoxication, abdominal distension, neck stiffness, various types of anemia, etc. Almost all psychiatric etiologies suggest incompatibility as the main cause. Topography, a new branch, is emerging which explains the combination of food's basic categories and their effects on the body's systems.

9. Discussion

When categorizing food based on various criteria, Ayurveda changes the classification from elemental to aspects like post-digestive effect, potency, virility, and so on. Ultimately, all classifications reflect changes at the elemental level. Modern science has primarily described food according to its nutritional value rather than its components. They haven't described them as hot, cold, suitable, or unsuitable foods, etc. During digestion, food gets broken down into physical properties, sensory attributes, and then further divided into the three doshas. It is these trigunas that act upon the mind. Therefore, their importance has been described only in terms of physical or psychological influences, not at the spiritual level. Dietary regulations and the twelve factors to consider provide a framework for acquiring food that aligns with bodily and functional considerations. Any food science that doesn't take into account these codes and practices does not consider the vital role played by slow intake of food, which stimulates the digestive system and results in a well-organized digestion process. When consumed properly (Samyak Yoga), food nurtures the body, while excessive (Ati), improper (Mithya), or inadequate (Hinayoga) intake can lead to adverse effects on the body. By including each taste (Rasa) cautiously in meals, optimal benefits can be obtained. Health is considered the ultimate attainment, encompassing prosperity, happiness, and liberation. Ayurveda gives more importance to promoting positive health rather than treating diseases; hence, ideal dietary habits are emphasized to achieve overall well-being. Food is essential for life, and consuming the same food in an improper manner can lead to various diseases. It is necessary for everyone to have proper knowledge about food and its significance so that they can derive greater benefits from it.

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