



Ayurvedic clinic:

Anxiety and irritability triggered by food

Finding perfect balance and health through ayurveda, yoga's sister science. *By Dr. Vijay Murthy*



It doesn't take a genius to figure out that certain foods make us feel happy and others don't. What's tricky is to determine whether foods that instinctively make us think we'll be happy - ice cream on a summer's day, for instance - are the one's that will actually result in genuine emotional and physical wellbeing.

From an ayurvedic perspective, warm, cooked, naturally sweet and nutrient-dense foods reduce nervous energy, stabilise an overly reactive nervous system, calm the gut and evoke sensations of happiness. Conversely, highly processed, excessively dry or cold foods, or re-heated leftovers, can make you hyperactive or dissatisfied, resulting in physical and emotional uneasiness.

One thing is for sure: if you are eating the wrong foods, you may experience things like anxiety and irritability. Through many years of study in health sciences and in clinical practice, I clearly see a correlation between digestive types and moods. For example, those who have a *Pitta* digestion (fast digestion) tend to do better on protein and those with a *Kapha* digestion (slow digestion) do better on carbohydrates. *Vata* types, who tend to have a fluctuating digestion, would need to choose the right food combinations to include proteins and carbohydrates in the correct amounts.

For those with some knowledge of ayurveda, don't confuse digestive types with the traditional ayurvedic body types. These are different to the ayurvedic digestive types.

The right foods

It's not uncommon in modern times to experience irritability and anxiety symptoms on a daily basis, even if you are not clinically diagnosed with anxiety. And yes, whilst it may be necessary to address severe symptoms through medical treatment, psychotherapy or other methods, it might also be important to consider the role of food, and food combinations, as a first step to addressing these conditions.

Anxiety and irritability can, to some extent, relate to the way we metabolise our food. The type of breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks we eat can affect our physical and psychological energy, which could manifest in symptoms of anxiety and irritability.

If you repeatedly experience any of the following on a daily basis you may want to consider your eating practices as the trigger: **Physical symptoms of anxiety** (stomach upset, twitches, tremors, fatigue, headaches, insomnia, dizziness, heart palpitations, sweating, shortness of breath, visiting the

toilet frequently, restlessness)

Cognitive symptoms (difficulty concentrating, negative thoughts, expecting the worst)

Emotional symptoms (irritability, feeling restless, tensed, brain fog)

Behavioural symptoms (avoidance, pacing, disinterest to go out or be social, seeking excessive medical attention or appointments with doctors or alternative health practitioners)

A warning on self diagnosis

A word of caution about self-diagnosing. When I was an internee at a psychiatric hospital 20 years ago, a professor warned me that there is “little difference between normalcy and a psychological imbalance”. It reminds me to beware of self-diagnosing or wrong-diagnosing. He went on to say “the best way to differentiate is by assessing the severity of symptoms and the frequency of such symptoms in relation to the real triggers”. Therefore, I would caution against self-diagnosis or quick judgements. It’s all too easy to wrongly diagnose ourselves. As always, if you have doubts, contact a qualified health professional. However, if your symptoms are not disturbing your daily functioning and yet are bothering you - as the anxiety or irritability is draining your energy and making you feel fatigued - consider addressing these first by changing the way you eat.

Foods to address anxiety and irritability by dosha type

Pitta digestion

If you are a *pitta* type and experience symptoms of anxiety, irritability, fatigue, restlessness, you are better off eating protein-rich food for all your meals. You may choose from dairy, tofu, legumes, lentils and nuts, or meats and seafood. You should add whole grains, non-starchy vegetables, and don’t hesitate to use all types of oils and fats. Fruit, although cooling for *Pitta*, may not be helpful if you don’t have excessive heat; it could still lead to anxiety. Though it can cool down the heat, it also gets metabolised quickly and the fructose it contains can make you hyperactive and restless. So, in general, except for berries, you’re better off staying away from eating large amounts of fruits. It’s also best to reduce or avoid coffee, sugars and gluten-containing foods.

Kapha digestion

If you have a *Kapha* digestion, you tend to have a weak appetite. You don’t necessarily feel ravenously hungry at mealtimes; you may prefer small snacks. You may also enjoy carbohydrate-based meals and sweet treats - although this does not mean they are good for you. Rather, it is just that you feel happy when you eat sweets. Those who mention how they were very lean when young and have put on weight and find it difficult to lose weight tend to have a *Kapha* digestion. If you’re experiencing anxiety symptoms or irritability daily this may be because you are not eating the right types of proteins and the right types of carbs in your diet. Although you will be satisfied with carbs, use lean protein, high starch carbs (pumpkin, sweet potato). You may also benefit from small quantities of fruits (apple, pear). Try and stick to low GI foods and do not overdo legumes and lentils. You’re better off reducing alcohol intake and sugars too. Since individuals with *Kapha* type digestion can also have slow functioning thyroids it’s important to reduce cabbage, mustard, kale or watercress.

Vata digestion

A variation in appetite is a key feature of *Vata* digestion. Here, you are more likely to not worry about putting on weight, as you tend to maintain your normal weight even though you eat all types of foods. However, if you do go on a diet and have either more of a protein-rich diet or the other way round, you will start to notice low energy, anxiety, nervousness or even issues with weight. As individuals with *Vata* digestion tend to fluctuate between fast and slow metabolism, it’s important your food consists of 50% carbs, 30% proteins and 20% fats.

Ideally, you should have a protein food with every meal. Although you might feel alright just with a piece of fruit for breakfast, you must make it a point to have something more substantial. You might enjoy starchy carbohydrates more, but try and eat non-starchy vegetables (asparagus, spinach). Avoid refined grains and use whole grains. An absolute must is to give up bread as it can not only upset the digestion but also severely affect one’s mood and energy. Eat fruits as opposed to drinking fruit juices and do not be scared to use oils in your cooking or as a dressing. As with other digestive types, it’s good to reduce or avoid coffee and sugar. ॐ

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Ayu Sanskrit
(from *Ayush* meaning lifespan)...

Definition:
Health...Life...

Veda Sanskrit
(from *vid* meaning to know)...

Definition:
Knowledge...Science...

Ayurveda Sanskrit

- *Science and art of improving quality of life and longevity...*
- *ageless knowledge of health through life...*
- *the oldest complete health system...*

Definition:
THE SCIENCE OF LIFE



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