

SPOTLIGHT ON AYURVEDA

YOGA'S SISTER SCIENCE

FRIENDLY FIRES

Under ayurvedic medicine, all disease arises from impaired *agni*, so make sure you keep your digestive fires burning

Ayurveda is the sister vedic science to yoga and has at its core the promotion of health. So, if we look at ayurveda in its simplest form, it is the healthcare manual it would have been good to have had from birth. For those wanting to lead a yogic lifestyle, ayurveda contains crucial elements that dovetail with your practice.

It offers seemingly simple ways to keep us healthy. For example, there are procedures to be followed at the change of a season, to help prevent problems as the natural world we live in changes, and as our planet makes its journey around the sun. When we lose touch with the seasons in our over-heated or air-conditioned environments, our own innate intuition loses the ability to choose wisely for us to enjoy good health. For some, as autumn approached, their skin may have felt more dry, or they suddenly went down with a cold. And now we are in winter maybe your appetite has changed and you want to eat warm, soupy food. The good news is that with some simple knowledge you can help prevent problems and be prepared for seasonal changes.

So, the question is where to start to better understand ayurveda? Well, the concept of *agni* is at the heart of ayurveda, and the chosen sutra for this issue. And it makes a pretty bold statement: all diseases arise from impaired *agni*.

Agni is the fire that transforms food into nutrients. Basically, if our *agni* is fit we are likely to be healthy, if our *agni* is unfit we are likely to experience ill-health sooner or later. But it is not just the digestive 'fire' within our belly; it also determines our ability to choose wisely. The role of *agni* is to 'transform' and this unseen force is happening in every

part of our body down to the smallest cell.

Physically, the digestion of food begins when it comes in contact with the tongue. However, thinking, smelling and seeing food stimulates the brain to release saliva and prepare the digestive tract to receive food. This is called the cephalic phase, so actually the process of digestion starts before food even arrives in our mouth, which is why we find our mouths watering at the thought of food.

In ayurveda, one is encouraged to sit, relax and enjoy food that has been prepared with love. The idea of processed TV dinners would not have been received well by the gurus of 5,000 years ago.

One simple way to monitor your own *agni* is to check your tongue when you brush your teeth. Does it have a coating? If so, what colour is it? White? Yellow? Brownish? A coating generally means your body is creating what ayurveda calls *ama*; basically undigested foodstuffs that may have turned into toxins, which are now accumulating in your body.

Of course, our bodies also tell us when our *agni* is not working so well as we may feel bloated or have indigestion. But perhaps in order to keep to busy schedules we either ignore this, or we buy over-the-counter remedies in an effort to keep symptoms at bay.

From an ayurvedic viewpoint, one's *agni* can vary based on the season and current diet, as well as factors such as age. So, if you do notice a coating, perhaps pay a little more attention to what, when and how you eat. You could also try a simple experiment of sipping a small cup of

boiled water before a meal, to see if your digestion improves. Try this for a few weeks and keep an eye on your tongue. If you can, buy a tongue scraper and use after you have cleaned your teeth each morning to remove any accumulated *ama*.

Just by paying attention to our bodies and how we feel, many times we can see an improvement. Of course, if you feel that things have gone too far or that you could do with some extra help, this is the time to consult an ayurvedic practitioner for personal advice and nutritional or herbal recommendations.

RELIGHT YOUR FIRE

A few simple tips to improve *agni* and reduce potential *ama*

- Try to prepare fresh food and avoid processed food whenever possible.
- Eat in a relaxed environment. Try not to eat when angry or stressed.
- Invite friends for a simple meal rather than eating alone.
- Avoid ice or excess fluid when eating. Think of it as putting out the 'flames of *agni*' you have created to transform or 'cook' the food eaten.

AYURVEDA IN THE KITCHEN

Kitchiri, a simple, easy-to-digest meal for two

This recipe is ideal for the cold winter months. It's easy to digest, simple to make and best of all the ingredients are cheap. If you're unfamiliar with some of the things, for example, mung dhal or asafoetida (also known as hing in Indian grocery stores), it's worth getting to know them, as they are especially suited to impaired digestion. Hing can help relieve bloating and the spice mix used below forms the basis of ayurvedic cooking, so it is a good idea to invest in all four. This recipe will serve two people and as a general rule of thumb, a portion size should be equivalent to the size of a small bowl. You can always serve with some extra steamed seasonal veggies like spinach or broccoli.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup basmati rice
- ½ cup mung dhal (yellow split dhal)
- 1 cup veggies from the cupboard or fridge (carrots, peas, courgettes)
- 1 - 2 cups water, add more if needed
- 1 small chopped onion gently sauté in ghee or oil (optional)
- Spice mix of cumin, coriander and fennel seeds (teaspoon of mixed seeds, dry roast whole in a pan before crushing in pestle and mortar. Releases wonderful aroma and far nicer than buying a powdered spice mix, which can lose its pungency quickly)
- Asafoetida (hing) small pinch (good for digestion find in Indian or health shops)
- Turmeric (small pinch)
- Salt and Black pepper to taste.

Method:

- Wash rice and dhal, soak for 20 minutes, re-wash
- Prepare and wash veggies
- Drain rice and dhal, add water to cook and bring to boil, simmer for approx. 30 minutes with turmeric, add water as needed, add prepared chopped veggies as per cooking time (e.g. carrots need longer than peas)
- Prepare spice mix as above
- If using onion gently sauté in a little oil or ghee, set aside when translucent
- When the rice and dhal are soft and fluffy and veggies are cooked (most of the water will have turned into a soupy mix). Take off heat and put onions back on heat; when warm, add ground spice mix to onions and oil, add this to rice and dhal.
- If not using onion, add spice mix to rice and dhal.
- Or to enhance taste, sauté spice mix in a little ghee or coconut oil, add another small pinch of hing then add to rice and dhal.
- Serve with chopped coriander, black pepper and salt to taste.

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